

The Truth among Narrative in Women's Research: Examples of Two Chinese Women Autobiographical Novels

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Article Info

Article History

Received:
January 23, 2021

Accepted:
April 06, 2021

Keywords : Narrative Analysis, Truth, Women's Research, Autobiographical Novels

Abstract

For the exploration of "truth" in the narrative, mainly based on Steph Lawler's thoughts, this study adopts two contemporary autobiographical pieces written by Chinese women to analyse. The methods of textual analysis and case study will be combined and utilized in it. To discover the connotation and value of the narrative analysis in women's research, this article will concentrate on types of truth constructed in the examples as well as rationality and significance in specific texts. Through the analysis of these two examples, it can be found that the narrative analysis has a certain worthy for women's research. People cannot guarantee the objectivity of these female discourses, in fact, women's subjective narrative can be regarded as a kind of truth. Through specific regional studies of the women's narratives, this article intends to offer a reference for future women's studies.

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.4666490

Introduction

Narrative analysis is a prevalent method in various fields, which can be utilised in gender research as well. Steph Lawler's discussion of narrative analysis has been debated extensively as regards how it might benefit women's research, which is the main issue in this article. Based on the understanding of the topic of women's narrative analysis, this study finds the question of whether autobiographical novels containing fictional elements is valuable to women's research. If it is, the following relevant questions are of worth: what kind of "truth" does it involve? Is it a crucial matter to judge or assess "subjective" truth and life experience? Do people need the knowledge to be "objective" in order for it to be valued? What significance does it bring to women's studies?

Generally speaking, the narrative is a form that closes to female thinking and emotional expression. It describes one's self-experience in a most familiar way for women (Lanser, 2002: 31), which has a certain value for gender research. The issue to be studied through textual analysis is the subjective truth of women's narratives. Meanwhile, it is necessary to combine some cases to acquire specific interpretation.

Through these two methods of textual analysis and case studies, this article analyses two pieces of contemporary autobiographical novels by Chinese women to clarify the rationality and significance of the narrative. The works are *One Person's War* by Lin Bai (1994; 2011) and *A Private Life* by Chen Ran (1996; 2015). According to a description of their growth experience, the authors portray a personal world of women (Zhang, 2008: 77), leading to a new trend in women's thought at that time (Hu, 2008). People can also discover ideas about narrative truth through the authors' expression of gender self-consciousness (Yang, 2005).

Based on the above analysis and the discussion of previous literary research, several findings are presented: First, instead of concentrating on the absolute objective truth, people can emphasize the significance of stories and the identity that the writer constructed through a subjective narrative. This study also mentions the rationalities of truth among narrative in women's studies. In addition, narratives also have the significance that can link past and present, the individual and the collective.

1. Literature review

Narratives, a story, tale, a recital of facts, particularly story told in the first person, which involve transformation (change over time), some "action" and characters, all of which are brought together within a whole plot and are a central means with which people link past and present, self, and other (Lawler, 2014: 8). During the storytelling, tracing the process of development of the narrative becomes the centre of a sociological inquiry, which benefits the narrative's significance in terms of identity-formation (Lawler, 2014: 13). Based on Ricoeur's notion that narrative can be considered as a category by which people can make an identity (1991), Lawler claims that this identity is not isolated from the social world, instead, it is closely associated with the

social world (2002). These notions signify the rationality and significance of narrative from the angle of time and space, which will be illustrated with literature in details later.

Lawler proposed (2002) narrative analysis concentrate on the approaches people make to and how they utilise stories to explain the world. It can be thought of serving as a social product produced by people in a specific social, cultural, or historical context and as interpretive means for people to represent themselves and their worlds both to themselves and others. It is embedded within a hermeneutic tradition of inquiry in that it is concerned with understanding: how people understand their lives, and how analysts can understand that understanding (Lawler, 2008: 14). Kohler (2005: 17) argues that narrative analysis in the human sciences means a family of approaches to different kinds of texts, which have a common story form. Wen (2017) argues narrative research is characterised by displaying the author's inner world through their self-description, which is suitable for women scholars' research on the female spiritual world. Pihlainen (2013) argues that the idea of narrative truth can be presented in terms of "the content of the form", "figurative truth", "metaphorical insight", etc. (p. 40). Narrative as a legitimate source for social research, allowing scholars to realise the complexity of gender and class in Chinese society. Apart from the third sentence that is a cultural theory, other theories mainly belong to sociology, which was used in some academic articles.

Autobiographical novels involve, firstly, documentary autobiographical literature which utilizes the true-life experience of the writers as the original material and, secondly, autobiographical novels involving real and fictional elements, and the case studies in this article are from this second type.

To some extent, the protagonist in the fiction can be regarded as the author, or as their representative (Li, 2006a: 34). In view of women's characteristics, it is proper for them to write their own experience, which can explore their inner world in some way. The traits of the autobiographical novels such as personal feeling and self-experience contribute to deconstructing female life and emotional experience.

If there exists a typical women's literary form, it may be a fragmentary and personal form, such as personal statement, autobiography, or diary (Li, 2006b). These sorts of narratives have been especially attractive to women's researchers expecting to discover the experiences of women "hidden from history" and as methods of inscribing women's voices (Byrne, 2003; Smith, 1993).

Based on ontological experience, female writers adopt this kind of narrative to reveal themselves (Huang, 2003; Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020; Suleman & Rahman, 2020), which is vital for analysis through the study of their discourses, especially in Chinese female literary writing in the 20th century. From these female literatures, "the individual woman" can be discovered. The subjective authenticity included in this "personal narration" (Dong, 2006: 187) is precious in the context of Chinese culture, particularly in the dimensions of resistance to and subversion of traditional ethics and social structure, which have become important references for the analysis of contemporary Chinese women.

2. Methods

The methods in this article include textual analysis and case study. The problem this research studied is the subjective truth in women narrative, therefore it is necessary to acquire some theory support from related documents such as academic journals and utilize persuasive examples to demonstrate.

The text analysis method is a parsing process that according to the actual situation of the text. The steps normally are text review, identification evaluation, classification, and sorting. Case study is an in-depth and specific study of an individual or an event, including particular or typical incidents, which may lead to a general analytical conclusion. These will all be integrated and applied throughout the article to demonstrate the core arguments. Combining with two famous Chinese women's autobiographical novels, some theories will be synthesized and analysed, especially about narratives, autobiographical, literature identities and so on, to extract a commentary description. In view of the narrative's feature, it is proper to utilize these two methods for a comprehensive examination, which also lay the foundation and form the logical framework for this study.

3. An interpretation of the truth in autobiographical novels

"Truth" represents something absolute and objective in Plato's Idealist Theory after which Aristotle confirmed the "truth" as real life. Their theories of truth lay the foundation of the theory of objective truth for later generations. Different from this theory of objective truth, with the rediscovery of values, people have realised a sort of subjective truth. In general, "truth" has two dimensions: external objective truth and internal subjective truth (Nie, 2016: 8-9), which require us to examine these ideas dialectically.

Similarly, the concept of truth has a special meaning in the literary field. It can be roughly divided into two types: the truth of objective fact and the truth of the subjective narrative. That is, the question of "what it is" and "how to say it" (Zhao, 2003: 16). Therefore, there is a lot of controversy about this point: the realness of autobiographical novels and why narrative analysis has value for gender research. What kind of values does it bring to us? It involves specific debates like whether female writing can help people to understand women further and whether it can become a bridge between women and the world.

Cao (2012) believes that it is difficult to restore memories through language because the "self" built by the author has both a real side and an idealised side (p. 189). It is created by their imagination, which is a sort of partial truth that cannot be fully interpreted.

In reality, fact and meaning are dialectically connected, there is no unmediated access to the "facts of the matter" (Lawler, 2014: 26-27). The important role of language cannot be ignored (Spiegel, 2005). Although the original memory cannot be fully represented through language, some elements through a writer's discourse and such process have some value (e.g., identity, communicative ways). It should be admitted that although this article relates to the problem of narratives in cross-cultural contexts, to some extent it is inevitable and there are still true places like the subjective truth.

There is little obligation in fictional narratives to have any relationship to real events. It seems that a valuable account cannot possibly be absolute objective, including writers' thoughts on whether they choose to narrate true things or not. As Haraway and Goodeve (2018: 230) mentioned, the truth is located, embodied, contingent. If people's understanding of the world always stems from some standpoint and is conceptually mediated, how can anyone claim to be "objective" (Sayer, 2011: 45)?

Narratives are an interpretive means to produce certain meaning. From the narrative approach point of view, it is neither "only the facts matter" nor "the facts do not matter at all" but what matters is meaning (Lawler, 2014: 26-27). Here the subjective thoughts of women can be viewed as kinds of accounts with personal values. Thus, the strong value-orientation of feminism can help feminists identify complicated subjective connotation, and hence provides a more objective understanding of the social world. Namely, subjectivity is unavoidable, whereas it can help people understand the world objectively when people consider this subjective knowledge.

Considering the rationality of the subjective truth, there are two critical points. First, when authors are likely to write imaginary components in works, the identity constructed by them may also have a certain authenticity. Second, when authors narrate sincerely, even if the story they create is not entirely true or just partially true, lots of information can still be taken from it, including the meaning of the events and the author's means of expression.

Related to literature, some plots have already been imagined and fabricated by the author before being incorporated into the work. To a degree, it is the product of the fusion of reality and imagination. To establish identity through it, women writers organise their personal experiences through memory, which is undoubtedly a fictionalised process. Materials that do not fit in the frame are automatically integrated, hence the author's memory is highly idealised. Nevertheless, the identity they constructed through narrative and the way of their narration are worthy to discuss.

Before talking about the specific text, there is a brief introduction of the two works. First, through the description of Lin's growth experience, *One Person's War* portrayed the love, the sensation and infatuation of women, which created a wonderful personal experience world. It included the plots that her physical desire, love experiences, etc. In *A Private Life*, Chen narrates her inner experiences in the process of her growth. The stories involve the affection with women, the process of sexual behavior with men, etc. From the perspective of Chinese women in the 1990s, both works as autobiographical novels are recorded female growing experiences in physics and mentalities. Through their personal discourses, some inspiration of gender relations will appear.

Specifically, she writes that she met a woman (Nan) when she was 27. When she tells the stories about their experiences, she suddenly inserts an episode of a gay game she played in her childhood (not with Nan). She writes, "That incident occurred two decades ago, when I was five years old" (Lin, 2011: 31). Here the time tends to be illogical which forms the content with virtual elements. Rather, connecting with the rest of the text, she has developed her sexual orientation. In this chapter, Lin mentions her admiration of women more than once: "I have extreme favour and sincere adoration for women's charm and fragrance", "Women are like the airflow highly in the sky, like the blooming roses in the snowy field, which is clean, elegant and untouchable" (2011: 31-32). Therefore, even if there are some of the incomprehensible places, they would not affect her personal identity formation. The specific timeline may be false, nonetheless, her homosexual inclination is relatively true. Something can be inferred, for the sake of completeness of the plot, that the author adds a clear awareness of gender in her childhood to better understanding her past behaviour (no matter whether the past facts are true or not) through her current analysis, which makes the stories likely to be understood.

Additionally, in Chen's work (2015), she describes the situation after her father left home:

I felt joyful because I could not endure my father's anger. I looked at the black car outside the yard, but I did not know why it became a police car, then father suddenly became a prisoner. He was trying to cast off the handcuffs, yet he was still pulled away by the police who would take him to a place far away from home (pp. 44-45).

She writes of this scene as though it was real until she guesses it may be a dream. Anyhow, it does not matter whether it is true or not. In reality, she has conflicting emotion with her father. It is true about the image of her father (autocratic and overbearing) and the figure of herself (rebellious against the patriarch of her family) she depicts, from which their identity and the process of her description are true as well. Indeed, identity can be produced through narrative. As Lawler (2014: 12) mentioned, it can be viewed as being produced through a series of creative acts in which authors interpret and reinterpret their various memories and experiences,

articulating them within the narrative.

Furthermore, the value of subjective truth is also reflected in the meaning of events and the way people narrate them. Research on the narratives produced by people is based on the precondition that individuals and groups interpret the social world and their internal status. The question is 'What is the significance of this event?' instead of 'What happened?' (White, 1996: 126). In other words, the value of information is disclosed in one's description and the way it is described, rather than merely the content of the story itself.

In autobiographical novels, it is hard to find a coherent plot or consistent narrative that structures the entire pieces by Lin and Chen. This implies personal memory, as a mixture of fact and imaginary indeed, is impossible to be fully restored. However, in these selective discourses, the significance of details and fragments can emerge, even though the plot is not coherent, which is one of the rationalities of subjective truth.

To be more specific, Lin describes her fearful experience of living alone at home, saying that, "I was floating in a dark space, without air, lightness and heavy" (2011: 13). However, she suddenly writes of a woman who she has never mentioned before: "I met Bei at that time. [...] Actually, I was not sure whether she was in one of my dreams. [...] To be honest, I frequently dreamed at night" (2011: 14). This account is full of narrative confusion. After that, the background of the woman and more experiences with her are briefly introduced, but subsequently she has not mentioned anymore. In fact, the meaning of this inclusion is discovered in later incidents that are accounted: the author chooses to write such content in order to pave the way for the story of her experiences with other women in later passages (e.g., Yao, Dan). Moreover, her approach to the subjectivity of memory is sincere. For instance, "That probably occurred ten years ago. [...] Life is like a dream; countless images have flashed before my eyes and will never come back. You are unsure whether you experienced something or not, unless Bei sees what I write and confirms this to me personally" (2011: 14). It elucidates that her attitude is genuine (whether Bei exists or not). Therefore, the emphasis can be shifted from the truthfulness of events to its significance and narrative method. The inner emotional activities and sincerity have far outweighed the issue of the truth of the story itself and the integrity of the truth. As Lawler (2014) claims, albeit if a story does not fully match the facts, it proposes a different kind of "truth" about its author (p. 26).

Regarding *A Private Life*, the combination of dream and reality makes the story linger between fiction and fact; however, people can still discover the importance of the author's stories and how she tells her stories as subjective narratives. When she wrote the association with Yi, it can be found her (Yi) appearance came out suddenly without any narration before. In the general process of recollection, for those who have a major impact on one's lives, people will always leave unforgettable memories (Zhang, 2008: 77). This kind of emotion could be brought into the statement of reminiscence. In this work, Yi occurs so unexpected that makes people doubt the authenticity of this role. Nevertheless, regardless of whether she is real or not, the meaning of the incident through Chen's narrative is evident: it can be found that she has a perplexing relationship with Mr. T and Yin after she saw Yi had sex with her boyfriend. Together with the sincere style of account, here readers can grasp the overall content and personal expression of affection instead of the text itself. From that description, can be detected that the author's personal experience in a sincere communicative way, which can be deemed as a kind of subjective truth that is reasonable.

In women's autobiography novels, a sense of authenticity is a controversial topic (Sun, 2014: 15), no matter whether related to language or subjective narrative. As a matter of fact, without considering the uncontrollable factor of different language, there still exist several valuable information. First, in spite of the subjective components women add to their works, the specific identity they construct helps readers understand the images of women. Second, the text always has a subjective narrative consciousness, even if fractional, it is valuable to study the significance of events and the way how writers explain or share them.

Scholars can engage in narratives to analysing subjective truth. The most interesting thing they need to notice is not just what happened, whereas how events are interpreted, what kind of knowledge of interpretation and how people respond to it, etc. Because social research is not just about what people narrate, what people already know, or the stories that are produced in the mainstream media. In fact, the main point is the significance of stories and the paths of communication. As a sort of truth, it is deeply embedded in social research and has pivotal meaning for study in other fields.

4. The significance of studying subjective truth

After demonstrating the rationality of subjective truth, there is the significance of analysing it in women's narratives, linking past and present, individual, and collective (Lawler, 2002: 248-253). As the past is remembered, memories are interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of the knowledge and understanding of the person.

In literary works, writers produce and reproduce the stories based on their memories; accounting for the past through the angles of recent society, and utilising relative information to elucidate their stories in different stages. These kinds of experiences constitute the emplotment, which brings past and present into a logical, coherent, and meaningful overall "story" (Lawler, 2002: 250-251). This will deepen the investigation and exploration of women's research.

For instance, there is this description of masturbation in Lin's work: "She felt herself swimming in the water [...] She yelled as if she had got an electric shock [...] she felt she became the water, her hand became a fish" (Lin, 2011: 1-2). In these lines, "an electric shock" is added from the perspective of her later understanding of the experience. Because it is too hard for a kindergarten girl to describe her behaviour, including the corresponding metaphors exactly. The narrative becomes a carrier that links the past and the present: the depiction of past behaviour has formed the complete story through the presentation of description, and her sober sexual awareness contributes to the exploration of the female personal world.

As Lin Bai (1997) has said, "In my writing, memory is a basic gesture, which makes me feel reminiscence through time. Through that process, everything can be observed for a long period and I can calmly record myself from various perspectives" (p. 18). In her memory, growth was not marked by major events; rather, it is developed in a fragmented form. The subjective textual narrative not solely attempts to reproduce the original image, however, to constructs the present through the backtracking and imagination of self-experience. Personal memory for her is not a reductive truth, yet an imagination.

According to the memories, the author narrates stories and explaining her past action. A series of experiences as a sort of subjective truth, reflect their values in the chain of time, especially in the spatial structure of her memory.

Similarly, Chen recalls the past at the time of the "present", and she always tries to analyse herself with clear, thoughtful, and logical thinking. During this analysis, it can be discovered that different stages of her growth are connected through her subjective narratives. For example, when describing the episode when she was "doing terrible things" (e.g., cut her parents' trousers when she was alone at home), she describes that kind of sense vividly: "I picked up the scissors and went straight to that pants then cut them fleetly [...] Simultaneously, it was as though my arm was hit by lightning, just like some kind of orgasmic and cold anaesthesia. That pleasure made me feel nervous and complacent" (2015: 49-50). Here the description of cutting pants is from an "internal experience" or visual angle. She uses the metaphor of "orgasmic and cold anaesthesia" to describe the pleasure after doing naughty things. There is no doubt that a little girl would not speak this kind of description. These are the feelings of what the current "I" is recalling in order to be close to the original emotion. She describes herself (of her past self) as "a rebellious girl who has not yet grown up and lacks rationality". These interpretations, from the current author's consciousness, intend to achieve the integrity of stories and make her behaviour more logical, and may reduce the difficulty in comprehension by readers.

She also explains in later narratives: "The impulse of picking up scissors was a vague psychological process. [...] It was impossible to grasp it at that moment because everything was disordered and illogical" (2015: 76). This type of retrospective discourse has concentrated the expression of personal experience, which can be deemed as a mediator. It not only highlights the self-interpretation, but also serves as a link between the past and the present within this process.

By considering identity regarding narrative, it is possible to find past and present connected in a spiral of interpretation and reinterpretation. In addition, it has the potential to break the boundary between self and other, hence, to discover selves and identities as rooted in the social world, since narrative identity places people within a sophisticated web of relationships (Lawler, 2014). It can be viewed as social products generated by people in the context of particular social, historical, and cultural locations. These accounts may be piecemeal or partial, whereas they can convey lots of about the person and their social world.

Referring to the text, Lin describes in Chapter Two:

I always like those soft and beautiful female bodies in picture albums. [...] I cannot understand why editors always insert that awkward male body that nobody will appreciate. [...] I recall a male-dominant advertisement of a washing machine which I strongly resisted. Why would wives worry if they have no washing machine? Are they a natural washing machine (2011: 31-32)?

These descriptions display that the author has a rebellious consciousness in such a male-dominated society. It not only reflects the awakening of women's awareness, but also implies women's status of subordination. The gender manifestation in advertisements and picture albums highlight the potential social relations between men and women. Therefore, the discourse here is not only personal, but also has a special cultural connotation, such as it reflects the traditional gender concept that men played the key role in society while women were confined to the family chores.

Also, she internalises specific historical events and their overall meaning throughout the stories and disperses them in different fragments. For instance, the description of "Princess Monique who visited China on the TV as if a brief flash" in her eyes, "gathering all the love and desire" for Lin (2011: 36). This not only implies her sexual inclination (a kind of affection for women), but also reveals that this story happened in the 1970s, which is easily understood in terms of the status and thoughts of women. In the Reform and Opening-up, Chinese society was in a rapid era of transition and women's thoughts had not been fully liberated. Hence the author uses a vivid metaphor to be close to her bygone affection, which can be comprehended clearly.

Women construct themselves through memories, giving meaning to their lives in retrospect of the experiences of self-growth. Those subjective truths have a certain significance, especially for studying contemporary women's thoughts. In existing Chinese cultural patterns, female writing is subject to a particular gender power because these public narratives are often connected to culture or institution. This male-centered discourse structure the author portrays in the article implies the social situation of women's status, which consider women in the whole society.

In *A Personal Life*, Chen writes, "My father angrily turned on the radio...there is a piece of music: 'Oriental Red, the Rising Sun, there is Mao Tse-Tung in China'...That happened in 1976, the radio was broadcasting the 'Tiananmen counter-revolutionary incidents'" (2015: 28). The radio here reminds us of the statement at the beginning of the chapter: "in the 1970s, Chinese families did not have extensive use of television...there is a Russian radio in my home" (2015: 26). This signifies she was born into relatively upper-class circumstances for the time. These symbols are utilised to narrate and interpret her identity and she constitutes her identity during the process.

Here the radio implies her class status, and she hints at her family conditions in the narrative. In addition, news broadcasts and propaganda songs indicate she was in the era led by Mao. It is in a period of great changes in Chinese history and impact on women's thoughts. In the context of higher-class background, the author has access to new knowledge including western ideas, which also explains the development of her sober gender awareness.

These works hint at the historical context in which the writers lived. They embody themselves as epitomes of the images of contemporary Chinese women as well as help us understand their behaviour and attitudes through the connection of individual and collective discourses. Such subjective truth in personal narrative connotes a strong feminine consciousness. Starting with the value of cognitive experience from a female perspective, they reveal the characteristics of women, which are a benefit for researchers to comprehend the self-recognition of women.

Therefore, it can be discovered the rationality attached to the facticity of accounts, and the significance of the narratives whether objective or subjective truth. The narrative can promote the constitution of women's identity, suitable for them to explore a particular self. Narrative research as a practical way that questions those traditionally male-dominated discourses in contemporary Chinese society. They not only represent a personal and subjective female world (for instance, about love and sex), but also indicate women's status in contemporary society (e.g., women writers as the representative of women as a group, highlighting their gender awareness, especially the relationship with men and social hierarchy).

Writers share their women's discourse to question the social structure of an unequal and patriarchal society in contemporary China. These women struggle to transform their lives and resist male power. They challenge the patriarchal discourse system by contesting the accepted relationship with men or by being defined by and through a male discourse.

Both women have unfolded women's personal and spiritual world through novels, breaking the gender boundaries in Chinese society at that time and arousing strong reactions. Men began to reposition their relationship with and focus on women, as women started to focus on the narratives a kind of discourses of self-reflection, which in itself is a kind of power.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed that even though there are certain "untrue" or imaginary elements in autobiographical works, the subjective truths still have implications for debates about how identity is constructed or how the way they narrate, especially the attempts by women writers (in regional cases) to construct and contest discourses about gender and sexual identities. In women's research, in the questioning of notions of "objectivity", it is valuable to explore the complicated subjective dimensions of connotations involving narrative consciousness, such as the values and judgments of women.

Through analysing examples of writing by Lin and Chen, it is clear that narrative is a kind of way of connecting the relationship between the past and present, the personal and social. To see this type of work of storytelling as a collective act, and production between writers, readers, and analysts, offers the potential for the understanding of feminism as a complex process of creation and questioning. Writing by women does not mean the finding of a true self that is already supposedly in existence, hidden or repressed, or a previously agreed "authenticity", as feminism and women's theory and writing has to question all that exists that prevents it from coming into being. It is therefore a process of coming into being and "narratives" of identity need to be understood as a process of change and transformation, never fixed, or assumed.

In addition, there is a certain connection between the "truth" and the gender issues. In women's writing, to some degree, the same-sex love or relationship will be expressed euphemistically instead of directly. The authenticity in the narrative is more obscure, because some cultural factors under certain social environment restrict the "transparency" of women's autobiographical writing (despite it also is related to the author's writing style). Meanwhile, the female author's discourse also shows their social class, which, admittedly, cannot represent the attitude and expression style of women from all classes.

In view of this, it is valuable to study the subjective truth in women narrative especially in autobiographical novels, as well as to explore gender relationship under the cultural and social background of a certain region.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to appreciate all the scholarly contributions made by individual supervisory committee members towards making the study a successful one. Besides, in accordance with the policy of the journal and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I declare that all authors of this study have no conflict of interest. We are reporting that we have no financial and/or business interests in any company.

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