Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics

ISSN: p2226-9231 e 2078-1458
BJBio 2022; 13 (3): 28-34
Submitted:15.4.2022
Accepted: 12.07.2022
Published:01.11.2022

***Review Article***

# Research Ethics and Pragmatic Context: An Exposition

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**Abstract:** Like research itself, research ethics involves and as well requires language use with all levels of linguistics analysis. Pragmatics is one of the levels used for (re)presenting research activities and ethics. Regrettably in the course of representing research activities and ethics pragmatically, some misrepresentations arise. Leaning on some secondary sources of data, this study seeks to describe how context impacts on research ethics. The study is anchored on Grice Conversational Theory of Implicature, which highlights the implication of violating research ethics and what context implies in research. The analysis demonstrates that research ethics is both context-specific and general. Next, context is proven to be the base of pragmatic misrepresentation in research ethics. It also shows that pragmatic misrepresentations amount to ethical violations in research ethics and beyond. The study concludes that there is a correlation between research ethics and pragmatics, made manifest basically by context.

**Keywords: Research ethics, context, pragmatics, research, implicature**

**Introduction:** Language is usually used in a context, or in different contexts. In the same vein, meaning is made of what is said from both the context and the literal, lexical, etymological or ordinary meanings of words. It follows that research ethics is more context based or dependent than context general[1]. Pragmatic context plays a crucial role in the construction of research and research ethics. This is because only pragmatics, out of the five levels oflanguage/linguistic analysis, takes cognisance of context, moves meanings and linguistic constructions, subject matters and discourses from the confine of micro-linguistics to macro-linguistics[1].

The other levels are phonetics/phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics. This study does not concern itself with the other levels of language analysis, but pragmatics. Within the confine of pragmatics, it seeks to concern itself with study does not concern itself with the other levels of language analysis, but

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pragmatics. Within the confine of pragmatics, it seeks to concern itself with context and pragmatic misrepresentations. Pragmatic misrepresentations 'occur when it is impossible to establish a relationship between a sentence and some relevant aspects of our knowledge of the world'[2]. By implication, the representation of research ethics is only bound to be really ethical when linguistic anomalies do not occur as a result of puncturing the relationship between sentences and the researcher's knowledge of the world. That is to say to have pragmatic representation rather than pragmatic misrepresentation in research works and documented research ethics, language use must conform with language rules, particularly the rules guiding the language in use[1]. Rules or principles guiding whatever activities constitute the ethics of those activities. This means that in using language pragmatically for research purposes, and in engaging in varied pragmatic activities, there are usually established standards, principles, norms and values that ought to be followed[3, 4]. The violation of the established standards, principles, norms, values and what have you implies the breach of research ethics on one hand and pragmatic misrepresentation on the other[3, 4, 5]. It is in view of the foregoing that this study rises to make an exposition ofresearch ethics and context, with a review to showing the impact of context on research ethics.

**Methodology:** This article relied solely on secondary data of recent and past literatures, sourced from library and internet, where the secondary sources were found. The search engines used for sourcing the secondary data for this literature article included Google, PubMed, Embass, Cochran, etc. The key search terms were research ethics, ethical issues, context, pragmatics, and implicature.

**Conceptual Clarifications:** Here, three concepts shall be concisely explained. These are context, pragmatics and research ethics. Accordingly, context is defined by Cook as a form of knowledge of the world, which can be used in both broad and narrow senses[6]. The knowledge includes inside and outside factors and other parts of a text under consideration, which he regards as 'co-text'[6] That is, other elements taken into consideration are the co-text. They are auxiliaries, subsidiaries or supplements of the text. For Yule, context is the physical environment in which a word is used.[7] This applies to words making up the ethics of research in a given environment[6]. To Widdowson, context is a schematic construct residing in the mind.[8] He notes that context is one of those aspects of the circumstances of actual language use, which are taken as relevant to meaning[8] Thus, it is learnt for Widdow's view that context, just like (research) ethics, is a social construct of conventionalised and institutionalised principles of research.

It is quite interesting that this construct resides in the mind. Ethics is internalised in the mind, for which one remembers that this or that act is wrong or right, generally acceptable or unacceptable, and so on[3, 4]. Nordquist describes context as words and sentences of any given discourse, which help determine meaning[9]. The implication of this definition herein is that context determines the meaning and the practice of research ethics. Research is contextually constructed, institutionalised and disseminated. Requejo defines context as what comes of practical manifestation or realisation before the interpretation of a linguistic unit[10]. Here, the definition emphasises practice or practical use of language and ethics rather than the abstract ideas that exist in statutory documents or words of mouth among a people. The characteristics of context include meaning, setting, circumstances, mood, tone, manner, previous and internalised knowledge, discourse or conversation, experience, factors other than linguistic factors, attitude, postural gestures, mindset, background, idiolect, worldview, literature, association, and registers, among others[11, 12].

Next to define is pragmatics. This is one of the levels of language analysis or one of the sub-disciplines of linguistics that is concerned with 'the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognise what is meant even when it is not actually said or written'[7]. Pragmatics looks at practical situations, realities and activities. For example, it looks at meaning beyond conceptual and theoretical perspectives to the practical embodiments of meaning and the

questions surrounding it. Doyle explains that pragmatic approach emphasises on the role of context and how to recognise all about context and the extent to which it goes in practice.[11] Doyle describes pragmatics in terms of what it does, noting that 'pragmatic approach to understanding context recognises the shortcomings of attempting to find some set of necessary and sufficient factors which would then constitute the context.'[11] For Stalnaker, pragmatics is what is concerned with 'defining interesting types of speech acts and speech products' and 'characterising the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence'[13]. This definition relates pragmatics to ethics, research and research ethics, stressing speech acts, speech products, context and practice. As Doyle[11]notes, Stalnaker's definition of pragmatics represents much of what is probably 'the dominant viewpoint in contextual research today.'

For these writers, research ethics is simply understood from the combination of the meaning of research and that of ethics. Ethics refers to the science and art of norms and values, which questions actions, deeds and activities that right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, etc.[14]. It takes side with and grounds law and morality to put forward, institutionalise, and sustain control measures that check against ways of life which are generally unacceptable and not in conformity with laid principles, standards, practices, rules and regulations, conventions, norms and values[4, 3]. Research ethics refers to norms, values, conventions, standards, principles and practices in the field of research, which ought to be adhered to in order to have a popular research work[15]. To have a popular and acceptable research, all or most of what concerns it ought to be right before a larger number of those involved in the research. This study maintains that ethics is simply a situation of extending ethical considerations to research in order to guide researchers and research bodies on what to do as right actions and ways of carrying out research.

**Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature:** This study is grounded by Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature (TCI).[16] Grice is a pioneer theorist of implicature. He basically theorises that in rational, co-operative conversation, people follow the principle of co-operation. His theory is said to have made a good attempt at clarifying the difference between what is expressed literally in a sentence and what is suggested by an utterance of the same string of words. Besides, the components of the notional and inferential framework that Grice set up to characterise various kinds of utterances content were intuitively appealing[17]. Implicature etymologically means 'imply' or 'implication' [18]. Also, etymologically, 'to imply' came from the Latin verb 'plicare', meaning 'to fold'.

Thus, to imply means to fold something into something else. As such, the discursive analysis of research as well as research ethics involves, among other things, context which tells of what is implied in research ethics. The pragmatics of mis/representation gets folded into research ethics in order to analyse the implication of pragmatic mis/representation.

Implicature is considered to be the aftermath of a successfully inferred meaning from utterances and past communicative experiences that seem to violate the four maxims of co-operative principles[19]. Despite not stating the violated principles in the definition, the definition emphasises past communicative experiences and communicative principles of co-operation between the speaker and the listener. Violating the principles brings to place the violation of ethics, which amounts to pragmatic misrepresentation. Conversational implicature is of interest to this study in that both individuals and groups persons engage in conversations. As Grice informs, the sum of what is said in a sentence, and what is implicated in an utterance of the sentence is called the 'total signification of an utterance[20]. Implicature covers a number of ways in which literally unsaid information can be conveyed. The relationship is represented schematically thus[21]:

Despite not defining implication, Grice's theory of conversational implicature remains relevant till date, because 'in everyday talk, we convey

propositions that are not explicit in our utterances but are merely implied by them'[22]. This means that his theory is practically realisable. The postulation of his theory is apt and practically obtainable till date. The emergence of Neo-Gricean and Post Gricean schools tells volume of the fact that Grice's theory is worthwhile and remains valuable in contemporary research and other like endeavours. Thus, it is apt here, since it captures the implication of violating co-operative principles in research, as in communication.

**Research Ethics and Pragmatic Context: An Exposition:** As noted earlier, language is usually used in varied contexts. Each of the context in which language is used exerts a distinct influence on what is made out of the language use. Let us take the example of English for a brief reflection on context here. Even though English language is used across the globe in constructing, disseminating and discussing research ethics, the context of its usage varies. The society in which it is used for whatever purposes exerts some forms of influence on it. This reality applies to other languages too. This study avers that language use for research activities as well as research ethics is contextual. Leaning on Firth's view that 'the complete meaning of a word is usually contextual,' this study argues that the complete meaning of research ethics in practice is contextual[23].

Context shows the manifestations of variances in culture, orientation, worldview, perception, behaviour, idiolect, accent, and so on, which are undoubtedly subject matters of research and are reflected in research ethics of various settings or contexts[24, 25]. Research ethics in Europe differ considerably from that of Asia, Africa and other continents. This is as a result of contextual variances in meaning, conventions, norms, values, customs, traditions, worldviews, etc. It should be noted that the type of context involved in a communication event (conversation) is usually shaped by the people involved in the given conversation(s). By implication, what is encoded and communicated to researchers and their audiences as research ethics is shaped by the people involved. And, the people involved usually situate in a particular context peculiar to them.

Context helps in determining meaning[11]. In this case, it is understood that the meaning of research ethics is determined by context, an aspect of pragmatics. In discussing the role of context, Doyle expresses the thought that the importance of context can be seen in its significant place in many fields.[13] The lead fields, where context plays significant roles, include Artificial Intelligence (AI) research[26], Philosophy[27], Anthropology[28], Psychology[29], Literary Theory[30] and Linguistics[30], among others. Accordingly, in AI, context is seen from a broad perspective, which stems from acknowledging that interpretation only takes place within shared contexts[26]. In Philosophy, the notion of context lies behind the recent debate over relativism[31, 32, 11]. Besides, as Doyle aptly notes, 'there are issues, such as whether one might be able to use pragmatic rather than principled distinctions to delineate contexts, which are of current interest in Philosophy'[11]. In Anthropology, Margaret Mead had laid a foundation for the form of ethical relativism called 'Cultural Ethical Relativism', which is not in the field of Philosophy but Anthropology[11]. The basic idea of this form of ethical relativism is that cultural values need not make appeal to any absolute standard, and are free to adopt any standards they may choose[11].

Psychology also concerns itself with questions of contexts. Beyond using context to refer to physical surroundings in psychology, it is also used to refer to unconscious representations[29]. Psychologists talk about and analyse context in terms of conceptual and perceptual contexts[29]. Context in psychological discourse also reflects what context means to experts in AI and the analysis they do with context[11]. Decisions regarding context are made in the field of Literary Theory about a text, the author, the reader, and how a text is best interpreted. These involve the context (setting) in which the author wrote a text, the setting (context) where the work takes place and the context within which the reader interprets the artwork[33]. Context also plays a role in determining and discussing the predominant themes (race, sex/gender, economic power relations, conflict,

etc.) in a text[33, 11]. Doyle points out that the major concern of Literary Theory in discussing context is to examine the 'nature and role of contexts in creating and evaluating meaning and understanding'[11]. Context is of interest to Linguistics as regards where it belongs and what meaning entails[34, 35, 11].

Ideally, conversation ought to be guided by the four co-operative principles and maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner[12]. In a sentential linguistic construction, where words occur or appear in series, (situational) context is one of the factors that determine not just the meaning of words in the given sentence(s), but also the meaning of the entire sentence. It should be noted that context resolves around the situation and setting of the communication. Some other factors include the type of text, the images accompanying the sentence, the speaker's and the hearers' perception, knowledge, competence, idiolect, mood, tone and several other linguistic and paralinguistic features. More so, context is as an essential factor for the interpretation of linguistic expressions (constructions). Benjamins says that context enables people to predict the meaning of utterances[36]. This assertion rests on M.A.K. Halliday's insistence on making the analysis of meaning beyond linguistic system, taking social system in which it occurs into consideration too[37]. That is, both text and context must be considered. While it is true that in constructing or knowing the meaning of a linguistic unit, the interpretation of syntactic and morphological elements of the text[38]are required, doing so also requires considering the context.

It should be noted that there is usually a kind of connectivity in the grammatical function of each of the words in a sentence, which produces the overall meaning of the sentence, as a result or product of the connectivity. Just as Chomsky talks about a match in syntax, grammar and semantics in order to have a correct and acceptable linguistic construction[39], this study avers that beyond the interaction of the aforementioned levels of linguistic analysis is the infusion of pragmatics into the interaction chain, in order to make symbolic and associative meaning or sense of the semantic impulses that make the utterances semantically correct and acceptable. Chomsky[39] exemplifies with: 'The colorless green ideas sleep furiously.' This sentence is semantically meaningless, but syntactically meaningful. It is syntactically meaningful because there is a subject–noun phrase (The colorless green ideas), a verb – predicate (sleep), and adverb - adjunct (furiously). Literarily, the sentence is meaningful and acceptable in that 'ideas' are personified – given human or animate quality and function. Thus, contextually (pragmatically), the sentence is meaningful, while semantically (literally), it is not meaningful.

Nagy has affirmed the role of context by reiterating and analysing its importance in vocabulary learning[40]. He notes that from common sense, two observations are obtained about the importance (i.e. role) of context. First, the meaning of a word often depends on the context in which it is used. Second, apart from explicit instruction, people pick up much of their vocabulary knowledge from context. He adds that research proves significant limitations of 'guessing meanings from context' as a means of learning words. This assertion undoubtedly tells of how misinterpretation of meaning arises from guessing meanings from context. Thus, Nagy insists that effective use of context to construct or decode meaning is imperative[40]. He informs that by using context effectively, one can disambiguate words or infer meanings of unfamiliar words, and disambiguating words depends on a variety of knowledge types. These are world knowledge, linguistic knowledge and strategic knowledge. Nagy[40] emphasises that 'to some extent, world knowledge and strategic knowledge can help compensate for limitations in second-language learners' linguistic knowledge'[37]. On the whole, despite the appreciable role of context, it has the 'problems of holism, relativism, and the very intelligibility of certain construals of context'[1, 11, 41, 42, 43]. Therefore, from the above instances of context in various fields as well as research in the fields, it is quite clear that context has a significant place in research ethics. It impacts greatly on research in general and research ethics in particular.

**Conclusion**: Given the analysis done so far, this study concludes that there is a correlation between research ethics and pragmatics, which is made manifest basically by context. The influence context exerts on, or the role it plays in construction of ethics with its pragmatic meaning, is the manifestation of pragmatics. The manifestation goes on to typify pragmatic (mis)representation in various regards. When there is no informed consent in research, there is a case of unethical representation of the participants. Plagiarism, covert research, deception, manipulation of data, fabrication or falsification of data, subjectivism, bias, and violation of established code of conduct, standards, principles and conventions of various facets are all phases of pragmatic misrepresentations. These misrepresentations are of concern to the pragmatics of (mis)representation. All these ill acts are obvious cases of gross violation of research ethics, which arise from and involve pragmatic misrepresentation of various concerns of research that are ideally guided by research ethics.

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**Acknowledgement:** We highly acknowledge all those whose works were used.

**Author's Contribution**: The first author coined the topic, shared the parts, gathered some data, wrote her parts and proofread the work. The second author gathered some other data, wrote her assigned parts and did the referencing. They both did harmonisation of ideas.

**Conflict of interests:** No conflict of interest.

**Funding:** No funding