

What is the difference between a conflict of interest and a conflict of responsibilities?

“Conflict of interest is the conflict between interests and the professional judgement. If the researcher chooses the interest, it is usually a bad choice in the long run for the whole science community. However, the conflict of commitments is mostly a commitment with companies. If the researcher does follow the commitments, there is nothing so serious.”

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS EXPLANATION?

“A conflict of interest is something that may lead an investigator to engage in practices which subtly benefit him at the expense of other researchers or science as a whole, typically involving financial gain. On the other hand, conflicts of commitment relate to division of time and resources; this might arise if someone who is already working on many projects agrees to take on more work.”

Is there a clear delineation between these two ideas? If yes, explain why there is no ambiguity. If no, suggest a situation which might be hard to classify.

“In my opinion, there is a clear difference. A conflict of interest is an integrity problem, where outside forces or other factors affect the actions of the researcher. A conflict of commitment solely deals with how time is split among various responsibilities.”

1. “Time is money” (Ben Franklin)
2. “Money is the root of all evil” (St. Paul)
3. “Time is the root of all evil” (syllogistic reasoning)

(Google finds various postings of this, going back to 1988)

“Occasionally there can be overlap. For instance, a researcher might have commitments to work on their consulting work and to work with their student and not have time to accomplish both. Here, there is an obvious conflict of commitment, but the financial gains from the consulting work are also a interest that is in conflict with the students advancement and continued research.”

Give an example of a conflict of interest which might arise in an academic mentor/mentee relationship?

“The mentor may want the mentee’s research to be more applied so they can get more grant money, but the mentee wants to do more theory.”

Give an example of a conflict of interest which might arise for an author of a published paper.

“An author is publishing on the effects of a pesticide on wildlife when they receive funding from Monsanto.”

A referee suggests you cite certain literature as one of his/her major objections. The suggested papers are relevant to the topic of the paper, but far from critical for the contribution of the paper. Do you

(i) do as suggested.

(ii) avoid adding the citations.

You are asked to review a paper for a leading journal. You have high professional respect for the first author, and the paper looks interesting to you. You also count this author among your personal friends. Can you responsibly agree to review the paper? (Imagine you are giving advice to another friend who is in this situation.)

A. *“I would not agree to review the paper, because I consider the author as my personal friends.”*

B. *“Although the author is one of my friend, I do my best to evaluate the quality of the submitted paper in a fully professional way and submit a fair review.”*

IF YOU DO DECIDE TO REVIEW, SHOULD YOU DISCLOSE YOUR FRIENDSHIP TO THE EDITOR?

MIGHT THE PRESIGE OF THE JOURNAL AFFECT YOUR DECISION? HOW?

“Yes, as long as you can confidently say that your friendship will not influence your ability to referee the article and let the editor know about the relationship. Otherwise theres no problem with suggesting an alternate reviewer who does not have the same relationship.”

REFEREES HAVE TWO DISTINCT TASKS.
(1) LOOK FOR ERRORS AND OMISSIONS; (2)
ASSESS THE VALUE OF THE WORK TO
THE FIELD. HOW DOES FRIENDSHIP
AFFECT THESE TWO TASKS?

Most PhD students have to balance time allocated to teaching (GSI) with their thesis research. Is this a conflict of interest and/or a conflict of commitment? What is your advice on how to manage this balance?

“In my opinion, it is a conflict of commitment. The research should be put in the first place, but we should also be responsible to the students that we teach.”

“This is a conflict of commitment. PhD students need to decide how to divide their time between research and teaching. My advice would be to set aside a certain number of hours each week for GSI work so you fulfill your duties, but aren't swamped by teaching responsibilities.”

“Being a GSI is an important though not essential part of being a PhD student. Most PhD students could not be so if there were not GSI opportunities. So this is not a conflict of interest, since earning a PhD essentially requires teaching. Similarly, it is not a conflict of commitment. To balance these duties, I would suggest allocating a more than enough time for teaching on an average week. Then, with the extra time, one could prepare for future weeks where time would be scarce.”

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE TEACHING AND
RESEARCH SYNERGISTIC? WILL A
PROFESSOR’S RESEARCH ACTIVITIES
MAKE HIM/HER A BETTER TEACHER?
WILL A PROFESSOR’S TEACHING
ACTIVITIES MAKE HIM/HER A BETTER
RESEARCHER?

The two main ways to manage conflicts of interest are transparency and avoidance. Give an example of a conflict of interest best managed by avoidance and another best managed by transparency. Explain your answer.

“Avoidance: you are asked to review a some grant proposals. In the review meeting you realize that one of the proposals is from your competitors. You notice the conflict; thus, you notice the chief of session and leave the room to avoid this conflict of interest.”

“Transparency: you are asked to review a paper proposals. You notice that this paper is submitted by one of your competitors. Although you feel the conflict, you know that you are one of the best in the field that can review this paper. Moreover, you are 100% sure that you can fairly review this paper. Thus, you notice the editor in chief about the possible conflict while you submit your review.”

“In cases where a researchers is deciding whether to approve a grant for his previous PhD students, it is better to manage this case by transparency.”

“When possible, avoidance is usually the best policy. Especially in easily avoidable situations, such as developing romantic relationships with mentees or students. Transparency is often best used for difficult-to-avoid situations that are also not severe or direct conflicts, such as evaluating people who are or recommendations from personal friends.”

IF IN DOUBT, TRANSPARENCY BEATS
AVOIDANCE. IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING
AN ACTION WHICH YOU WOULD NOT
WANT TO ANNOUNCE TO THE
DEPARTMENT CHAIR, LIKELY IT IS BEST
AVOIDED. ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS
WITH MENTORS/MENTEES ARE NOT
ENTIRELY PROHIBITED, SO LONG AS YOU

ARE BOTH HAPPY TO DECLARE THEM!