

Topic for Discussion: Conflict of Interest

Cross-Cutting Themes: Collaborative practice, Peer review

Topic Overview – What’s at stake?

- In the course of a research career, investigators inevitably encounter conflicts of interest or other commitments which threaten the objectivity of peer review and/or scientific inquiry.
- Sources of conflict of interest and commitment range from hierarchical to financial to subtler, indirect forms of pressure that can arise in the course of collaboration.
- Such pressure may interfere with a researcher’s responsibility to ensure that data are as free from bias or distortion as possible, a responsibility that maintains the integrity of science and endeavors to advance science that best benefits society.

Getting the Discussion Started

- Which of the remedies proposed by Cole et al. to address potential conflicts in funding allocation make the most sense to you? Did any of their recommendations surprise you? How so?
- What factors bias or affect decision-making in your lab or research setting? How are these threats to objectivity typically identified?
- In what ways might you respond to a member of your research team who you felt was making questionable decisions because of an apparent conflict?

Use the 4 R’s to Think Through a Particular Case or Issue

Process for Thinking through Difficult Ethical Dilemmas	
Recognition:	<i>What are the issues being raised? What is the underlying ethical concern? How does this issue impact me?</i>
Reasoning:	<i>What values are at stake? Are there competing points of view? What are the potential benefits and harms of different actions? Are there any rules or guidelines that can help?</i>
Responsibility:	<i>What are my responsibilities? Do others have responsibilities also?</i>
Response:	<i>What should I do – and why?</i>

“Back pocket” Cases

- As a new assistant professor, you have been offered a research contract with a biotechnology company, to continue a line of research you began as a post-doc. The contract will pay 40% of your salary and additional research costs. In exchange for this support, the contract notes that all study results will have to be reviewed and approved prior to peer-reviewed publication.
- You are a new postdoc in the lab and notice that the PI seems to have a good working relationship with his grad student Jim. During a discussion of a grant application they are working on, Jim and the PI mention “throwing out” a data point to get a better graphical fit for a key result. The PI feels that the success of the grant application may depend on this, and Jim tells the PI that he thinks the outlier was “my fault—just a human error”. You aren’t sure whether you should speak up.

Assigned Reading

Cole AM, Baldwin LM, Keppel GA, Kuwana E, Mollis BL, & Wilfond BS. (2017) Conflicts of interest and distribution of resources to community partners: an organizational ethics dilemma. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, 11(1): 99-106. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cpr.2017.0013>

Additional Resources

- University of Washington Human Resources: Ethics and conflict of interest. <https://hr.uw.edu/policies/ethics/>
- Romain, P. L. (2015) Conflicts of interest in research: looking out for number one means keeping the primary interest front and center. *Curr Rev Musculoskelet Med*, 8:122–127. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4596167/pdf/12178_2015_Article_9270.pdf