

# Towards understanding the nature of conflict of interest and its application to the discipline of nursing

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**Abstract** Most incidences of dishonesty in research, financial investments that promote personal financial gain, and kickback scandals begin as conflicts of interest (COI). Research indicates that healthcare professionals who maintain COI relationships make less optimal and more expensive patient care choices. The discovery of COI relationships also negatively impact patient and public trust. Many disciplines are addressing this professional issue, but little work has been done towards understanding and applying this moral category within a nursing context. Do COIs occur in nursing and are they problematic? What are the morally appropriate responses to COI for our discipline and for individual practicing nurses? In this paper I examine the nature of ‘conflict of interest’ as a general ethical category, its characteristics and its application to our discipline. Conflict of interest is an odd moral category that may actually or potentially result in immoral decisions. The moral justification for COI is grounded *prime facie* by the moral value of respect for persons and principle of fidelity from which trust is developed and maintained. In review of the historical development, there appears to be consensus on some qualities of COI that are presented. I conclude that making judgments about COI are challenging and often difficult to determine from a nursing perspective. Improving nurses’ and professional organizations’ awareness of COI and sharpening our ability to respond appropriately when COI arise can reduce potential harm and promote trust in those whom we serve.

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