

In research, does conflicts of interest mean scientific misconduct?

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We need to talk about conflicts of interest (COIs) in scientific research. Specifically, we need to talk about the difference between COIs and research misconduct. There seems to be a misunderstanding in the media and public conversations that a COI is research misconduct. While a COI may lead a researcher to commit research misconduct, a COI is not, on its own, research misconduct.

A COI is a situation in which a person has multiple competing interests, financial or other, that have the *potential* to compromise or bias their judgment or objectivity. COIs exist whether or not decisions are affected. COIs merely recognize the potential for wrongdoing based on conflicting motivations.

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In the United States, the US Office of Science and Technology Policy has [defined research misconduct](#) as follows:

Research misconduct means fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.

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. . . . This is not to minimize the importance of the disclosure of COIs. It is this very transparency that allows us to identify problems, limit COIs and scrutinize research that *may* be biased. In science, credibility is our currency. Transparency and disclosure about conflicts of interest are critical to maintain our credibility.

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We need to stop automatically punishing scientists for having COIs. It's not having a COI that's a problem, it's how COIs influence research that can become problematic. Let's make sure we are judging the behavior of scientists, not based on just the existence of COIs, but based on how they act in the face of those conflicts.

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