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The Conflict of Interest and Public Administration: A Citation Analysis

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Abstract

Conflict of Interest is a familiar phenomenon among Public Administration experts yet research wise, it has not received much attention. While government officials are accused of corruption and having Conflicts of Interest more than any other individual, research shows that only 1% of Conflict-of-Interest studies has been devoted to investigating the subject in the field of Public Administration. A Conflict of Interest occurs when an official is forced to choose between carrying out his/her administrative duties or following his/her personal interests. These interests include an individual's financial or non-financial interests as well as the financial and non-financial interests of his/her relatives or friends. The research method of this article is based on citation analysis and drawing a citation network. The findings show that Sah, Moore, Loewenstein, and Cain are key experts in the field. The study of Cain et al (2005) is the key one that has the most relevance to other studies in this field and the study of Miller (2001) is also central which has been cited a lot. American Journal of Bioethics, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, and Journal of Personality and Social Psychology are esteemed scientific journals that have been most benefited from publications, communications, and citations, respectively. Ethics is the concept that has been co-occurrence with the conflict of interest. This means that a conflict of interest is inherently a normative and behavioral concept. Finally, it should be noted that given the results of this research, the concept of Conflict of Interest will remain a foundation for corruption in governments and public organizations if Public Administration experts and scholars remain as inattentive to the issue as before. Research into Conflict of Interest has been mainly focused on normative and behavioral approaches which means that there is a need for new researchers taking new approaches to break out of this cycle.

Keywords: *Conflict of Interest; Public Administration; Citation Analysis; Content Analysis; Corruption.*

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Introduction

Many speak of the term ‘Conflict of Interest (COI)’ without realizing that this generalization may damage the understanding of the concept (Williams-Jones, 2011). Research findings show that in many cases, COI rules have created ambiguity and confusion in defining the term (Komesaroff et al., 2019). In addition, according to the neoliberal school of thought, the more we move toward commercialization (privatization), the more complex mechanisms of managing COI are needed (Mays et al., 2016). In other words, huge trends towards New Public Management (NPM) have transformed the culture of the public sector (Boyce & Davids, 2009). Conflict of Interest is the potential tension between an expert’s professional accountability and his personal interests (Sah, 2019). Strictly speaking, a Conflict of Interest occurs when an individual’s personal interests do not allow him to be professionally and ethically accountable to others (Cain et al., 2011). Studies indicate that it is very difficult for even the smartest people to have two opposing ideas in mind without them affecting each other (Moore et al., 2010). Human behavior is not merely a function of self-interest but of the social world and its follower groups (Miller & Ratner, 1998; Miller, 2001). But despite that, organizational theories have been mainly focused on creating new values (liberalism) instead of following the existing ones. As a result, a large proportion of people have readily accepted personal gain in different professions and professionals (Moore et al., 2006). That is why Conflict of Interest resides at the heart of all financial crimes (Loewenstein et al., 2011), and no area of government is immune to it (Boyce & Davids, 2009). If COI situations are not properly managed, public trust can be damaged. Therefore, the existence of COI laws is essential to building public trust (Hurst, 2017). That being said, Conflict of Interest has caused a great decline in public trust (Boyce & Davids, 2009; Hurst & Mauron, 2011; Hurst, 2017; Belisle-Pipon et al., 2018; World Bank Group, 2020: 23; Cain & Banker, 2020).

A quick search of databases including Emerald, Tylor & Francis, Science Direct and Wiley online revealed that 82% of COI studies has been conducted in Healthcare and Health Studies and only 1% of the studies is in Public Administration. Stark (2001: 336-337) believes that paying attention to COI in and out of role leads to differences in professions. As long as they are examined out of role, the situations wherein a COI occurs remain the same across different professions. On the other hand, if COI situations are examined in role, they would obviously be different across different professions. Therefore, one cannot make valid arguments on the challenges posed by COIs in Public Administration by simply turning to research done on the concept in other fields. Hence, it is necessary to conduct a separate study of the concept in Public Administration based on previous research in order to provide a comprehensive summary for thinkers and readers. Since there is only a

small number of studies conducted on COI in Public Administration, research pieces in fields other than Public Administration which have theoretically addressed this concept have been considered in this article.

This article aims to identify theoretical and scientific gaps in COI in the public sector. However, the necessary condition for achieving this goal is to identify prominent thinkers, top journals, key studies, and lexical co-occurrence of this concept. It seems that no research has been conducted on citation analysis and different aspects of COI in Public Administration. Based on the analyzed data, first the research questions are answered regardless of the specific profession, then based on each question, the situation of the public administration profession is criticized. However, there is no comprehensive study on COI in Public Administration. Conducting detailed research helps the audience and researchers to become familiar with the main and effective resources and to recognize and be able to expand the field.

According to what has been discussed, the following questions are addressed in this article:

1. Who are the key thinkers of COI?
2. What are the leading journals of COI?
3. Which characterization studies are central to COI?
4. What are the main categories of COI studies?

Main concepts

Conflict of Interest (COI)

In order to regulate COI, a state must first define it. This definition is the most important theoretical feature of a COI regime (Chapman, 2014: 23). Bergstrom (1970) claims that a specific definition of COI cannot be given because it has various definitions in different contexts and conditions. Despite its importance and visibility, however, the concept is often loosely applied and poorly understood (Kamesaroff et al., 2019). A COI does not only refer to the benefit of the person, relatives, allied parties or friends but anything that affects job performance can be called a COI (Carson, 1994). COI exists in all professions, but they are different from each other (Williams-Jones, 2011; Stark 2001: 337-336). Looking at the studies of thinkers such as Barry et al. (2013) investigating COI in medicine; Bazerman et al. (2006) investigating COI in accounting; Belisle-Pipon et al. (2018) investigating COI in consulting and Boyce and Davids (2009) investigating COI in Public Administration shows that almost no field be found that has not been suffering from COI. In general, a COI in the public sector is any sort of financial or non-financial benefit of the officials or their close relatives that negatively affects the proper performance of their duties (Bero & Grundy, 2016; Sah, Fagerlin, & Ubel, 2016; Sah, 2019; World

Bank Group, 2020: 20).

Corporations, especially large ones, are becoming increasingly complex in terms of their organizational and financial structure. It is important for judges and commentators to understand and cut through this complexity in order to reveal the core COIs that occur and are resolved within corporations (Orts, 2001: 144). Article 8 of the model code of conduct for public officials requires that public officials should not allow their personal interests to conflict with their public position. It is their responsibility to avoid such COIs, whether real, potential, or apparent (World Bank Group, 2020: 2). The governance structure of any organization creates potential COI, not only because of the personal interests of the officials but also the multiple roles that they fill (Boatright, 2001: 230).

Public Administration

Paying attention to Public Administration is important because government officials are largely accused of corruption and having COI (Boyce & Davids, 2009; Hurst & Mauron, 2011; Hurst, 2017; Belisle-Pipon et al., 2018). Broader trends in New Public Management, including outsourcing, contracting-out, public/private partnerships, self-regulation, sponsorships and significant interchange of personnel between the public and private sectors, have broken down traditional public sector employment cultures and their attendant obligations and loyalties (Boyce & Davids, 2008; 2009; OECD, 2003: 22; Puustinen, 2015: 39-40). Calabro and Torchia (2011) believe that the big difference between corporate governance in private and public sectors is that the private sector focuses on the performance of the company and board members, while in corporate governance, the public sector focuses on the interests of other stakeholders (citizens, shareholders, managers etc.). Hence, the role of the board of directors in the public sector is not yet as developed as the private and non-profit sectors, and simply using the corporate governance models of the private sector is not appropriate for the public sector. Given this fact, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has published eight different books on COI in public sector from 2003 to 2010, which can be general guidelines in this regard.

Moore et al. (2006) claim that we, as a society, fail to adequately address the destructive effects of COI. In a sense, failure of auditor independence is rooted in the failure to resolve politicians' COI between representing the voters and funding their political campaigns. This means that politicians and officials are the first group of people that should manage their COIs, and then it is expected of people in private organizations to do the same thing. Furthermore, states can define COI in different ways to "suppress" or "sanction" it. Some states include any type of COI in their definition of the term as situations that should be avoided. Others sanction COIs by allowing some types of it to occur as part of the political process. States can sanction

COIs in two key ways. They can either set a threshold for COIs or sanction them by excluding pecuniary interests (Chapman, 2014: 23-24).

In different countries around the world, there is some sort of institution, organization, council or commission that guides officials, politicians and each person that works for the public sector to prevent, eliminate and manage a COI. Some examples of institutions that prepare COI programs in each country include the Anticorruption Office (OA) in Argentina, the Australian Public Service Commission (APS) in Australia, the Canadian Conflict of Interest Network (CCOIN) and the Interdepartmental Network of Values and Ethics Practitioners (INVE) in Canada, Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in Indonesia, the Integrity Central Government Code of Conduct in Netherlands, National Anticorruption Commission (Nazaha) in Saudi Arabia, the Council of Ethics for Public Officials (CEPO) in Turkey, the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in United Kingdom, the Office of Government Ethics (OGE) in United States.

Research Methodology

Imported data

In this research, the primary data from another study was gathered as the imported data. Jafari Nia et al. (2022)¹ have conducted a study titled “Systematic Review of Conflict-of-Interest Studies in Public Administration” but there are a few questions that have not been answered in their paper. Their study is completed using a systematic review and there seems to be a need for adopting a new approach to answer new kinds of questions. To answer research questions, two methods of citation analysis and content analysis were used in the current study.

Database search

Regarding the research questions, 106 sources were searched in the Web of Science database. This choice of database over other available databases was primarily because the Web of Science has the highest scientifically ranked journals and articles (Ball & Tunger, 2006) and is also the best database for retrieving older sources (Bauer & Bakkalbasi, 2005). For the purpose of conducting this study, 106 sources were searched in the Web of Science database out of which only 44 were indexed in its citation database. Hence, 44 Studies were selected to be analyzed in this paper.

Used Software

VOS viewer is the software that was used for citation analysis and drawing a

1. Jafari Nia, S., Abedi Jafari, H., Vakili, Y., & Ranjbar Kabutarkhani, M. (2022). Systematic Review of Conflict of Interest Studies in Public Administration. *Public Integrity*, 1-16.

citation network to answer questions one to four. To answer the fourth question, Excel 2016 was used to categorize the studies in a coherent way.

Used method for analyzing papers

In questions one to four of the research, the authors tried to describe the current situation of COI studies. Therefore, they minimized their role and relied on the output of the software, but in the fourth question, the researchers tried to review and reflect on the content of the studies. To this aim, the opinions of the authors have been included in the paper. Finally, through adopting content analysis, 44 studies were reviewed and criticized.

Results

Key Public Administration Thinkers in the Field of Conflict of Interest

The first research question that needs to be answered is who are the top scholars of this field. This is important because recognizing key figures contributes to our existing knowledge of the field as these thinkers are considered pioneers who have promoted our scientific knowledge of COI studies. As illustrated in Figure 1, Sunita Sah is the leading researcher, and Don A. Moore is the one whose research has had the highest number of citations in the period between 1960 to 2018.

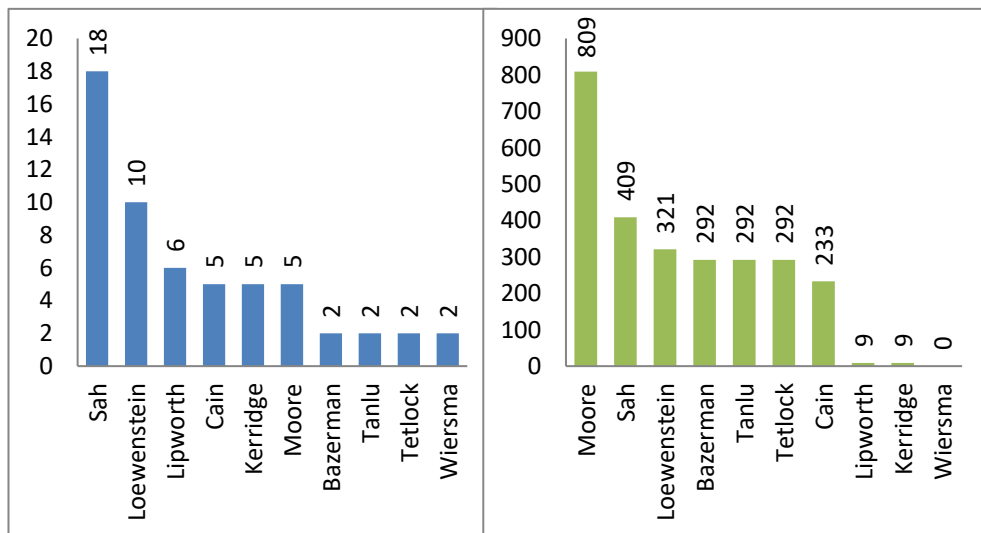


Figure 1. Key scholars of COI

Figure 2 demonstrates the communication network between researchers which indicates the way researchers relate to and communicate with one another. If in the analysis of top thinkers, the focus had solely been on the authors' names and number of their studies, the search results would have been misleading. As you have probably noticed, there is no indication of Lipworth in Figure 2 despite having published six pieces of research in Public Administration. This is because the aforementioned thinker has not had any collaboration with the other key thinkers. The difference between Figure 1 and 2 is that Figure 1 shows the top Scholars based on two criteria of most citations in Google Scholar (Right) and most publications in the field of Conflict of Interest (Left), but Figure 2 has identified the top thinkers based on the elite network.

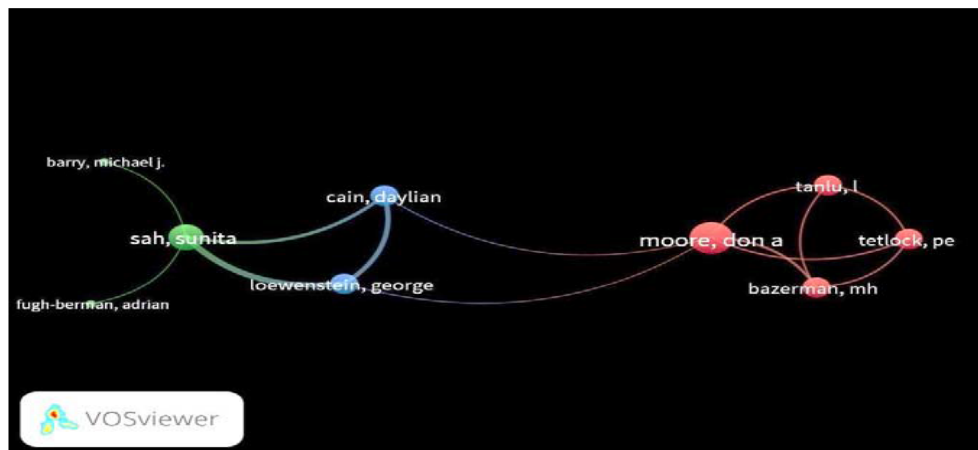


Figure 2. Key thinkers of COI

In addition to this, another finding obtained from Figure 2 is that although Sah and Moore have the most published studies and citations respectively (as shown in Figure 1), the key role of Cain and Loewenstein should not be overlooked since they act as a bridge connecting Sah's work to Moore's. If Cain and Loewenstein were not present in COI studies, the studies in this field as well as the results would become isolated. Therefore, it can be concluded that the key thinkers in this field are the four researchers mentioned above. Unfortunately, despite pointing out the importance of COI in Public Administration, none of the mentioned thinkers specialize in this field. This issue is very important because many situations of COI arise from the change of approach in Public Administration such as the emergence of New Public Management. Conflict-of-Interest studies in the field of public administration require

experts who understand the theories and changes of approach in Public Administration.

Active Conflict-of-Interest Journals

Active COI journals can be ranked in several ways since the definition of being active is varied. For example, having the maximum number of publications may be considered as being active; Or having the highest number of citations in articles about COI may be regarded as being active; and finally, being active may refer to the interconnection between journals. Figure 3 below demonstrates the most active journals based on the three variations of defining the term.

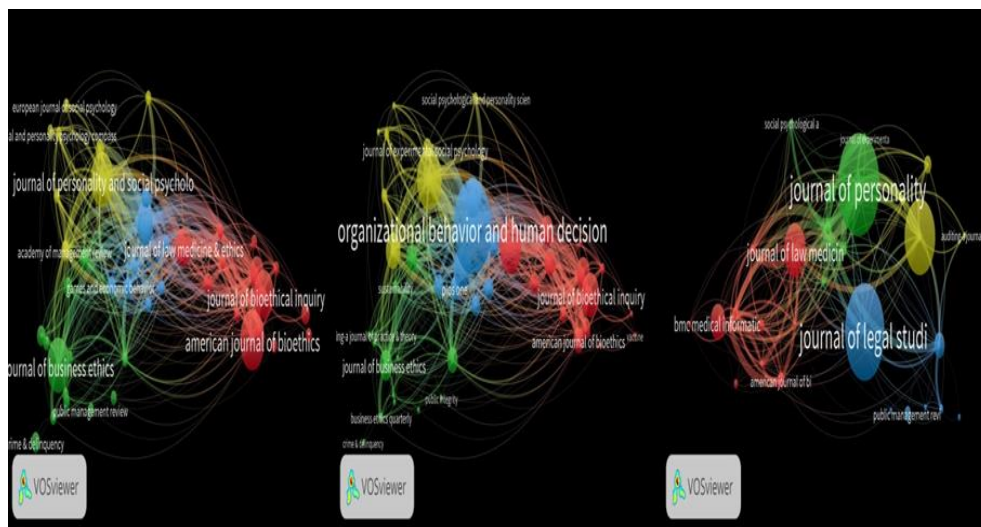


Figure 3. Influential journals of COI

Figure 3 can be divided into three parts. The first part on the left shows those journals that have had the highest number of publications. The middle part illustrates the journals that have had the most connection with their peers. Finally, the part on the right of the image shows the journals with most citations. American Journal of Bioethics has the highest number of publications; the Journal of Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes has the most connection with other journals; and finally, the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology is the most cited journal among others in the field of COI. Same as the COI thinkers, the journals mentioned in the citation analysis do not specialize in Public Administration. It is expected that at least one or two journals in the field of Public Administration realize the importance of COI and encourage scholars to develop theories on the issue.

Key Studies of Conflict of Interest

Another question to be answered is which of the 44 selected studies are the most important in terms of COI. The key studies can be identified in two ways. They can either be identified and ranked based on the highest number of citations or based on the network created across COI studies. In Figure 4, the key studies are shown based on the two criteria mentioned above. Such selection would help future scholars to recognize and use the rich literature of the field in less time, avoid repetitive studies, and finally have contribution to the scientific development of the field.



Figure 4. Top journals of COI

The left and right-hand sides of the figure, although showing different results, come from the same source, i.e., the 44 COI studies. This intriguing difference stems from taking two different approaches to analyzing studies based on the highest number of citations and most cross references. According to the left-hand side illustration, Miller (1999) is the most cited study. Miller published a study in 2001 with the same title, “the norm of self-interest”, the content of which is no different from his previous research in 1999. Miller’s 2001 study had the highest number of citations in Google Scholar, while his 1999 study obtained the same status in the Web of Science database. Since the content of Miller’s two studies is not different, reading each of them can be valuable for the readers. On the right, the study by Cain et al. (2005) is considered to be the most important study with the highest cross reference with others. This study has been able to change the basis of COI studies since 2005. Therefore, reading Cain et al. (2005) is highly recommended.

The results show that no significant study on COI has been conducted in the field of Public Administration. Although Kjellberg’s study (1995) and that of Bergman & Macfarlane (2018) were conducted in Public Administration, they did not have a

large impact on studies of COI. Boyce & Davids (2009) is surprisingly the only study that has fundamentally addressed the issue of COI in Public Administration. The publication of only one valid study in this field shows that this important issue i.e., COI, has been seriously neglected despite the fact that most public officials are accused of having COIs and committing fraud by abuse of position.

Main Categories of Studies

Definition of COI

The First Category deals with different definitions of COI. Bazerman et al. (2006) and Moore et al. (2006) argue that COI has been subject to issue-cycling, so that management theories not only negate COI but also theorize and standardize it. Demski (2003) argues that a superficial understanding of COI has left control systems unable to control it. Foster (2003) believes that the concept of COI refers to situations where a person does not consciously know that said situation is beneficial to him/her. Carson (1994, 2004) and Boyce and Davids (2009) claim that in COI, not only the financial interests of the expert should be considered, but also the non-financial interests should be taken into account as well. Furthermore, interest refers to not only the interests of the officials, but may also refer to the interests of others (spouse, child, friends, etc.) which may be in conflict with the officials' duties or responsibilities. This category is named definitions of COI. Although there is no mention of the public sector in this category, it can be implied that a correct and comprehensive definition of COI is necessary for managing COIs in the public sector. For example, if the laws and regulations of countries and organizations see a COI as a conflict between an official's duties and strictly his financial interests, the situations of COI are limited to the financial interests of the official. Therefore, the first step in managing COIs in any country and organization is to properly define the term.

Mechanism of Disclosing COIs

The Second Category takes a critical look at the mechanism of disclosing COI. The studies under this category have attempted to explore the effectiveness of disclosing COIs as a mechanism for managing these situations. They have looked at this mechanism from different angles and take opposing standpoints regarding its effectiveness. Cain et al. (2011) believe that disclosing COIs increases 'bias' so it is not a good solution for managing COIs. Kartal and Tremewan (2018) argue that disclosure increases the accuracy of the decision-maker or consultant, especially when disclosure is mandatory. Sah et al. (2013) state that disclosing COIs can reduce trust in the physician, but the burden of disclosure falls on the recipient of the recommendation (i.e., the patient). In other words, the patient cannot withdraw from the advice of a doctor with a COI due to disabilities. Sah and Loewenstein (2014)

argue that, when an expert knows that s/he should disclose his or her COIs, s/he seeks to avoid COI situations in order to maintain her/his reputation and ethics. Sah (2019) believes that disclosure of COIs can increase or decrease the trust of the consultant. The study by Cain et al. (2005) and the study by Barry et al. (2013) show that disclosure of COIs is an inefficient mechanism for managing COIs. The study by Silverman et al. (2010) indicates that there can be a contradiction between what is expressed and the specific behavior that is shown which is called cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance means that the expert says something but does the opposite. Therefore, it is not possible to expect an independent behavior from an expert who has disclosed the COI, because he may show the opposite behavior. Another study by Sah et al. (2018) indicates that if professionals reveal a COI in their blog, it becomes a sign of expertise. As the results of the studies show, disclosure is not the only available mechanism for managing COIs. Since Cain et al. (2005) is one of the most cited studies on COI disclosure and states that disclosure increases trust in the expert, it must be said that disclosure alone is not an effective mechanism. This category is called the contradictory effects of disclosure. Reviewing the laws and regulations in the public sector reveals that the authorities have relied heavily on the disclosure mechanism for managing COIs. Considering that most prominent studies show that disclosure is not a suitable mechanism for managing COIs, the emphasis of laws and guidelines of countries and organizations on this mechanism is in contrast with the findings of these studies.

Other Mechanisms of Managing COIs

The Third Category refers to mechanisms other than disclosing COI. Studies by Loewenstein et al. (2011) and Sah (2012, 2013) refer to the mechanism of eliminating the COI situation. By eliminating the situation in which an expert is confronted with a COI, there is no need for contradictory effects of disclosing a COI. However, Sah and Loewenstein (2015) believe that it is impossible to eliminate all situations of COI in the market. Nonetheless, the mechanism proposed by Sah and Loewenstein is only one of the suggested alternative mechanisms for disclosing COIs. Church and Kuang (2009) have proposed the acquisition of information from multiple sources by the client counselor. Sah et al. (2019) argue that one must turn to the external factor of the object or person in order to reduce bias.

This category is called alternative mechanisms for managing COIs. As inferred from the results of the reviewed studies, COI researchers have come to the conclusion that mechanisms other than disclosure should be taken into consideration. Meanwhile, the public sector should also look for alternative mechanisms to replace the disclosure of COIs. Although it is ideal to eliminate all situations of COI, as other researchers have pointed out, this mechanism is not really practical.

Conclusion

Conflict of Interest is not the new concept of the decade, but it is one of the most important and complex ones. Although the fields of Health and Healthcare have surpassed the field of Public Administration in this sense, the COI in the field of Public Administration can be compensated by correct public policy making. As mentioned in the introduction, disregarding COI in the best-case scenario leads to a decrease in public trust and loss of public interest. These two concepts, namely public trust and public interest, are the main and fundamental concepts of Public Administration.

The studies by Sah, Loewenstein, Cain and Moore are all essential for those interested in the concept of COI, regardless of their profession. However, studying the work of these thinkers does not help us understand the COI situations in the public sector because Public Administration is not their expertise. For example, in a separate study with a critical approach, the role of changing Public Administration approaches and the occurrence of COI should be addressed in order to determine the extent to which the change of approach in Public Administration can create or eliminate the situation of COI. Such a study can only be examined by researchers who have mastered the theories of Public Administration.

The focus of this study was on reviewing valid key studies about COI, and for this purpose, the output of systematic review studies was searched in the Web of Science database. This led to the omission of some studies despite their content being rich and informative, and since the researchers tried to minimize their involvement in the research, they did not change the search results in the Web of Science database. Therefore, this measure is considered as a limitation of the current research but it is strongly recommended to those interested to read: Handbook of Conflict of Interest in the Professions written by Davis and Stark (2001), and Handbook of Conflict of Interest: Challenges and Solutions in Business, Law, Medicine and Public Policy by Moore et al. (2005). Additionally, experts and those interested in Public Administration should also read the eight books published by OECD on COI as they are specifically written for the field of Public Administration.

The main finding of this study show us first sage for attention of this phenomena is definition of that. if definition not be clear , the other actions will be ineffective. Insisting on conflict of interest disclosure as a solution to conflict of interest management can be very dangerous because it takes attention away from other more effective actions. Based on third category, the best action is eliminating the COI situation however it is impossible to eliminate all situations of COI in the market. Although it is ideal to eliminate all situations of COI, as other researchers have pointed out, this mechanism is not really practical.

The future of the COI in Public Administration depends on how much attention

the theoreticians and thinkers of the field give to this issue. If they dedicate their time and energy to conducting various studies while taking different approaches, they can hopefully remove the complexities of the issue and expand our knowledge thereof. If Public Administration thinkers remain as indifferent to this phenomenon as in the past, there will be no change in our knowledge of COIs as such. As the findings suggest, most categories of mechanisms for dealing with COIs have a main theme of disclosure and behavioral mechanisms. Therefore, one cannot expect dramatic changes to be made in our knowledge of this field. From the perspective of the researchers, previous experts in this field cannot be expected to change their research approach, but with appropriate public policy, new researchers can be invited to abandon the previous approaches i.e., normative and behavioral, and adopt new approaches such as structural and cultural reform. For example, it is not expected of Sunita Sah to change her research approach (normative and behavioral), but researchers who enter the field with a new approach can be encouraged to do so. In the appendix section, the 44 analyzed studies are listed.

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