

Seeing Shades Of Grey: A Grounded Theory Study Of Audiology's Relationship With Industry

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Objectives: Audiology holds an interesting and yet largely understudied position relative to the hearing device industry; this study examines this relationship. Our research questions were: How do audiologists view their relationship with industry in terms of ethical implications? What do audiologists do when faced with these ethical tensions? How do social and systemic structures influence these views?

Background: Audiology needs an evidence-informed and nuanced approach to inform its important work at the audiology-industry interface. As a health profession, audiology is linked inextricably to technologies and their associated manufacturers, and obligated to conduct itself in an ethical, self-regulated manner. As an academic field, audiology is linked, frequently and productively, with industry, because research and development can be optimized through academia-industry collaboration. Yet these links to industry can become problematic when audiologists interactions with industry are perceived by other professionals, patients, or the public as constituting conflict of interest, when transparency about the nature of relationships is clouded, when conflict of interest results in undue influence on clinical and research decisions, and when profit interests impact patients autonomy and choice.

Methods: A constructivist grounded theory study was conducted using semi-structured interviews of clinicians, students, and faculty. Grey literature was also reviewed. A purposive sample of 19 Canadian and American audiologists was recruited ensuring the study had approximately even representation of audiologists clinical, academic, educational, and industry work settings. Theoretical sampling of grey literature occurred alongside audiologist sampling.

Results: Findings identified the audiology-industry relationship as symbiotic mutually necessary but not necessarily positive. A wide range of responses to this relationship was seen, from denying any ethical concerns to avoiding any industry interactions altogether.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that audiologists view the professional relationship with industry as necessary but potentially challenging. This study suggests ethics education approaches/models that prepare and support individuals to recognize and respond to ethical tensions in everyday practice.