

# Nurse Author & Editor

## Volume 17 - December 2007, Issue 4

### Manuscript Reviewing: An Ethical Perspective

Mary Ellen Wurzbach

Although there is an explosion of nursing knowledge in the form of nursing books and journals today, little has been written about those behind the scenes – the book or manuscript reviewer. Given that the direction nursing takes in the future is dependent upon the writings in the profession, this is a critical oversight. The current article will address the ethical issues experienced by nurse reviewers and provide ethical guidelines for reviews.

Because there is a nursing knowledge explosion, reviewers hold an increasingly important role in the publication process. Reviewers provide counsel and guidance for editors and authors of books and journal articles. They make judgments about what will and will not be published by influencing the editors' decisions about publication. They also assist authors in honing and presenting a clear message.

The relationship the reviewer has with the editor and writer of the manuscript is defined by the policies established by either the publisher in the case of books or the editor/editorial board for journals. Reviewers should clarify what the expectations of them are before beginning a review. Is there an expectation that the reviewer provide publication advice? Is a second review required after author revisions? The reviewer has an ethical responsibility to adhere to the policies of the journal or book publisher once they have agreed to do a review of a manuscript or book.

Because the reviewer influences the entire process of publication from submission to sales, ethical issues abound. Yet, little is written about the dilemmas faced by the reviewer. These ethical dilemmas can be divided into those that conform to the principles of bioethics (Beauchamp and Childress 1994), including nonmaleficence, beneficence, respect for persons (autonomy), justice and fidelity.

### Ethical Principles for Reviewers

The principle of non-maleficence says that one ought to do no harm. As a reviewer, one does no harm by maintaining the confidentiality of the review, by not disclosing the author, title, or even that one has reviewed a manuscript. The reviewer also discloses any conflicts of interests to the editor. Does the reviewer know the author? Is the reviewer writing a manuscript or book about the same subject? Is the reviewer influenced by the reputation of the author? Does the reviewer expect to receive a reward for the review from the author? Can the reviewer be honest about the review? Is the reviewer influenced by the editor's or author's identity or position in nursing? The final and overriding question is, what is the relationship between writer, editor and reviewer?

Following the principle of non-maleficence leads also to a second principle, respect for persons. Sometimes in reviewing an article or book, there is a value conflict. Possibly the reviewer values excellent writing or the content of the article or the ideas expressed may pique a prejudice of the reviewer. The reviewer must be impartial, that is, trying to view the article and author as objectively as possible. The author may actually offend the reviewer's sense of aesthetics, ethics or sense of

what nursing is and where nursing is going in the future. It is still very important for the reviewer to provide constructive comments. Comments that derogate the author or the author's ideas compromise the process of review. This is not to say that the reviewer cannot be critical; but criticism must be impartial and objective. When the author receives comments that are not considered and impartial, it affects all of nursing. It discourages the author, may prevent a publication that could be very helpful for nursing, or silence an author's voice forever.

The reviewer has a responsibility not only to the journal or book editor, but also to the author and the profession. Because both writers and indirectly reviewers have an immeasurable influence on the future of the profession, both ought to be nurtured. This influence of author and reviewers prompts the discussion of a third principle. The principle of beneficence suggests that one promotes good and tries to prevent harm. This might be seen most clearly in the reviewer's promotion of excellence in nursing scholarship. The reviewer's responsibility to the profession cannot be over emphasized. Every review that promotes or discourages the publication of an article influences the development of the profession. A philosophy is promoted through the journals of the profession. Because each journal and editor has their own editorial philosophy and policies, reviewers should seek journals with compatible values.

The principle of justice also has an impact on the reviewer's role. The principle of formal justice suggests that all persons be treated equally unless there is a relevant difference in circumstance. It is another responsibility of the reviewer to review each manuscript or book as fairly as possible regardless of the reviewer's knowledge of who the author may be. This principle is particularly difficult to adhere to when the review is done post-publication and the author is known, but justice requires that the review criteria applied to one author and book be the same criteria for all other authors, given that there are no relevant differences.

This leads to a final emphasis on the principle of fidelity. Fidelity encourages honesty, and truth telling as well as promise keeping. Reviewers are honest, tell the truth as seen from their perspective, and keep their promises to the author, editor, and to the profession. Despite the numerous influences coming to bear on the reviewer, in the end the reviewer must be honest and loyal to nursing. If one is loyal to one's own convictions one may be mistaken; if one is loyal to the editor or author one may also be mistaken. The higher goal is to be loyal to the ethical ideals of nursing, thus promoting nursing excellence in scholarship.

The ethical ideal is what the reviewer pursues. Pursuing the ethical ideal prevents conflicts of interest, which could bias the review. This pursuit of the ethical ideal requires thoughtful self-reflection because it is not always easy to have immediate knowledge of one's own ideals. Careful reflection and observation of one's reviews will allow one to be critical not only of the author and the article, but also critical of one's own reviews.

### **Ethical Guidelines for Manuscript Review**

1. Remain loyal to the ideal of excellence in nursing journalism. This will prevent conflicting loyalties to editor, author or your own value biases.
2. Be impartial in judging your own and others work. Impartiality will allow you not only to criticize the book or manuscript you are reviewing, but also your own review. Impartiality is essential for meeting the principle of justice. As John Rawls (1999) has written, reviewers must see themselves as being behind a "veil of ignorance" – not knowing the identity of the author or if the author is known post publication, ignoring the author's name, title or position.
3. Make conflicts of interest manifest. If there is a conflict of interest the editor ought to know

this. Some conflicts of interest though are impossible to resolve. Being an expert in an area of book publishing or nursing knowledge gives you the ability to review certain books or manuscripts, but may make doing an impartial review more difficult.

4. Maintain respect for persons. Despite the blind process of review, it is essential that all parties to the process be treated with respect. This includes a plethora of activities, from offering constructive criticism to returning reviews promptly.

5. Maintain the confidentiality of the review if prior to publication of an article. Many times the articles reviewed are farsighted and there is the impulse to share the information with others, but confidentiality is essential.

6. Be honest (truth-telling). Particularly when doing book reviews, ignoring the status or position in nursing of the author or editor of a book is necessary to the integrity of the review. The reviewer has a responsibility to the nurses who may read the book. This may include faculty who may choose a book for student purchase based on a review.

## **Conclusion**

The future of the nursing profession depends on the relationship between authors, editors and reviewers. The integrity of book and article reviews will enhance or obstruct this future. Following the suggestions offered in this article will help the reviewer avoid many pitfalls of the reviewing process. Ethical reviewing is essential to the growth and vision of nursing as a profession and discipline.

## **REFERENCES**

Beauchamp, T.L. & Childress, J., 2001. Principles of biomedical ethics. 5th edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rawls, J., 1999. A theory of justice. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Copyright 2007: The Author

Journal Compilation Copyright 2007: Blackwell Publishing Ltd

**Mary Ellen Wurzbach**

[Print this article](#) [Email it to a friend](#)

**[Back to Table of contents](#) | [View all articles in this issue](#)**