

## Nursing and Health Policy Perspectives

### Ethical responsibilities of authors

Editors are accountable for the quality of the articles published in their journals. However, the ethical responsibility for the contents of every published article remains with the author(s) who should adhere to the ethical principles of research while conducting studies and compiling articles and reports.

The term 'ethics' implies doing no harm, and acting correctly and honestly (Orb et al. 2001, p. 93). 'Ethics in health research includes appropriateness of the research design, the methodological design, and the funding sources, as well as behaviors in reporting data' (Orb et al. 2001, p. 93).

An article's title should indicate what the readers of the article could expect and refrain from making false claims. For example, an article with a title *Women's utilisation of cervical cancer screening services* should reflect the women's actions and portray reasons for their acceptance or rejection of these services. If nurses had been the target population, then the appropriate title would have been: *Nurses' opinions about the utilisation of cervical cancer screening services*.

Having decided on the title and topic of an article, the author must identify a specific journal to which the article will be submitted. Some authors seem to start off with the journals with the highest impact factors and work down this list after every rejection. This approach wastes much time, effort and resources. A more feasible approach is to identify which journals appear most frequently in one's own list of references and start by sending the article to one of these journals provided that the author guidelines have been implemented. Submitting an article simultaneously to more than one journal is unethical and dishonest.

All co-authors should agree about the sequence in which the authors' names are listed. In many countries the first author is regarded as the most important author although he/she might not be the principal investigator or the corresponding author. The inclusion of well-known authors' or researchers' names, even though they rendered no inputs into the study or the article (known as 'gift authorship'), cannot be justified ethically. This is done in an attempt to increase the prestige value and perceived credibility of an article. Gift authorship also occurs among academics who reciprocate co-authorship to increase their number of academic outputs.

Similarly, the use of ghost researchers and ghost authors who conduct research and write articles on behalf of the listed author(s) is ethically unacceptable. People's lives and wellbeing



could be adversely affected by unfounded claims to miracle cures for cancer and other conditions such as HIV/AIDS based on ghost researchers' published findings.

Before an author can claim that no previous studies had been conducted on any topic in a specific geographic area, a thorough literature search must be conducted. Usually a simple Google Scholar (<http://www.google.scholar.com>) keyword search produces numerous results. Relevant studies' findings, discussed in the background section of the article, contextualise the current study and should inform the readers about the need to conduct the current study.

Researchers need to follow a specific country's ethical guidelines. Usually a university or research institution grants ethical clearance for a research project, based on academic considerations. Thereafter the researchers need to obtain permission to conduct a specific study from the country's Ministry of Health, and/or the Medical Research Council, the local health authorities, and the managers of the participating sites. 'The research process creates tension between the aims of research to make generalizations for the good of others, and the rights of participants to maintain privacy' (Orb et al. 2001, p. 93). Research

conducted in communities needs to have the permission of community-based institutional review boards (IRBs), community committees or heads. Braun & Tsark (2008, p. 1) reported that: 'Research on minority communities has been criticised for focusing on researcher-identified issues (rather than community issues), for being conducted in culturally inappropriate ways and for not benefiting the group under study. . . for failing to share financial or professional profit with the community or by attaching stigma or notoriety to the group'.

Every person who provides information should sign (or thumb print) a consent form. Where study participants cannot read, then verbal consent needs to be obtained, and this needs to be noted by the researchers in an ethical fashion, and preferably with a witness present if appropriate. The authors must describe how they maintained confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence and ensured participants' rights to self-determination, full disclosure, respect, justice and freedom from exploitation. In cases of intervention research, additional care should be exercised to avoid misunderstandings between the researchers and the communities. For example, HPV (human papilloma virus) and HIV (human immuno-deficiency virus) might sound like synonyms to many people. Disastrous life-threatening consequences could result from immunising schoolgirls against HPV if these girls and their parents understood this intervention provided immunity against HIV.

The readers are entitled to sufficient details about the adopted research methods so that they can evaluate the significance of the study's findings. The author(s) must discuss the study sites, the target and accessible population, sampling methods, sample size, research instrument, data collection procedures and data analysis without resorting to any inflationary techniques. Validity, reliability and/or trustworthiness issues must be discussed in detail. Where the research instrument needs to be translated into a local language, the researcher has an ethical obligation to ensure that the translations are accurate. One bilingual expert should translate the instrument into the local language and another one should translate it back into English. Any discrepancies between the original English instrument and the re-translated English one should be addressed until consensus has been reached. Preferably, participants' replies should be recorded verbatim in the spoken language and translated later so that the original verbatim account remains available for future translation audits.

Despite the challenges listed above, researchers have an ethical responsibility not only to conduct studies among different communities, but also to publish their findings. 'Access to information can be a matter of life and death, and nowhere more than in the developing world, where knowing how to combat diseases like malaria and avert environmental

degradation is crucial to a society's viability and economic growth' (Lehmann-Haupt 2008, p. 1).

The literature review should address previous studies' findings relevant to the current study but should also indicate the research methodology adopted by these studies. 'Searching the literature is a critical part of any scientific research. Constructing and executing a successful search is the key to performing good research, conducting a thorough literature review, and solving clinical problems. Errors in search methodology will yield biased results of incomplete evidence-based answers' (Elghblawi 2008, p. 1). Authors may not 'copy and paste' sections, paragraphs or even sentences from other sources (including the Internet) without clearly indicating direct quotations with double inverted commas and acknowledging all sources. The sources of tables and figures should also be acknowledged in all documents. Eysenbach (2000) reported that the *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh* retracted an article because 36% of its contents were copied from different websites. Although software (such as Turnitin) exists for determining the percentage of non-original information, and for indicating the sources of such information, it remains the author's ethical responsibility to refrain from committing plagiarism, including ego-plagiarism. Retracting a published article for any reason whatsoever, but especially for plagiarism, could produce a life-long blemish on the authors' names and impact negatively on their future academic careers. While reviewers and editors might identify some instances of plagiarism, it remains the ultimate responsibility of every author to avoid plagiarism at all costs because '... plagiarism violates the professional nursing values of honesty and integrity' (Pence 2012, p. 12).

The research findings must be portrayed accurately and honestly based on correct data analyses. Where percentages are used, the actual number of responses should also be indicated. Claiming that 100% of the respondents agreed has a different meaning if the sample comprised five persons compared to 500 persons. Statistics must be clearly stated and reasons provided for selecting specific statistical analyses. It is customary to compare and contrast a specific study's findings with those of previous similar studies. In this respect it is essential to include previous studies' findings that support and oppose the current study's findings.

The conclusions of the study can only be based on the particular study's findings, nothing else. Conclusions can only be generalised to the target population if random sampling procedures had been employed. 'Generalization, which is an act of reasoning that involves drawing broad inferences from particular observations, is widely-acknowledged in quantitative research, but is more controversial in qualitative research ... generalization in relation to knowledge claims merits careful

attention by both qualitative and quantitative researchers' (Polit & Beck 2010, p. 1451). Authors who adhere to ethical guidelines avoid unfounded generalizations.

Every recommendation must relate to a conclusion. Recommendations cannot be based on other studies' findings. Any study's recommendations should be done respectfully without making accusations against the persons and/or institutions that participated in the study. Recommendations should indicate that commendable accomplishments should be sustained and that identified sub-optimal situations should be addressed in specific ways.

The list of references should only contain sources that were actually used in the text of the article. Ideally most sources should have been published within the previous five years, unless specific reasons are supplied for using older sources. Authors who use out-dated sources waste the scarce time of editors, reviewers and readers. De Jong (2009) reported that reference errors are prevalent in nursing literature. Every author is ethically obliged to ensure that every reference is correct and complete, and thus accessible to all readers.

Finally and fundamentally, the ethical responsibility of every author implies reporting honest data, collected in an ethically accountable manner, analysed and interpreted according to scientifically acceptable ways that could be audited by other researchers. The current editor of the *International Nursing Review* summarised this standpoint aptly by stating: 'Information gathering is so important . . . as we try to create changes in health, nursing and midwifery practices. We are all concerned with how to make sense of what constitutes relevant information as we grapple with the exponential knowledge growth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' (Turale 2013, p. 2). Authors who adhere to ethical guidelines will contribute to ' . . . confirming the supposition that nursing research is being increasingly seen, heard and cited in the international community. Impressive and continual impact factor gains demonstrate that nursing research and

nursing periodicals now rightfully occupy an eminent position in the international scholarly literature' (Smith 2010, p. 1498).

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