

Final editorial: Principles that cut across professions and disciplines

Mark A. Fine¹  | Paul L. Fine²

¹Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

²Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

Correspondence

Mark A. Fine, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC, USA.

Email: mafine@uncg.edu

As my 4-year term ends, I have reflected on principles that I have learned from editing JFTR and how those principles apply across different professions and disciplines. One of these was brought to my awareness when my co-author (and brother), who is a physician at the University of Michigan, recently shared with me this excerpt from an essay he wrote for incoming medical students:

In relationship-based medicine, the ability to see things from the perspective of patients and families is very important. We need to remember that we doctors have the privilege of having one of the few jobs for which an “average day” can be a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience for someone else. I sometimes think of the response of Joe DiMaggio, the famous baseball player, when he was asked why he played so hard every day, even when a game was well in hand. He said, “Because there might have been somebody in the stands today who’d never seen my play before and might never see me again.” Joe knew that what was an ordinary, even mundane, experience for him might be a once-only experience for the other person and he respected the importance of that individual’s expectations.

Here is a clinical example of the same sort of thing: When my daughter, Ellie, was hospitalized in 2011, she had a particularly difficult day that was made much better by the kind attentions of a wonderful nurse. I remember taking that nurse aside, at the end of her shift, and thanking her for all that she did. I said, “I imagine this was a pretty average day for you, the kind where if someone asks how the day was, you’d say ‘just routine, the usual.’ It would never stand out in your memory. But it was anything but routine for us and we will always remember your professionalism and kindness.” And we certainly do remember, gratefully, all these years later. I’m sure many of you have similar memories of medical care provided to you or your family members. And, unfortunately, some of you may have had the opposite experience, in which healthcare professionals just seemed to be going through the motions and your interactions with them were less than ideal. In medicine, we have the privilege—an often-daunting responsibility—of working with patients and families during transformative moments of their lives, moments that are often among the most stressful and consequential that they will ever have. However, routine these days may seem to us,

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we must recognize that they are exceptional for those we care for. And we owe it to them to do it the right way each time.

What is exciting to me is that his primary point about “relationship-based medicine” also applies to the journal editing and publication processes. As I reflected on his thoughts, I realized that journal editors need to treat their constituencies (primarily authors, but also reviewers and the general readership) in ways that are similar to how physicians should aspire to treat their patients. All of us who are involved in the publication process—and this includes a wide range of roles including authors, reviewers, editors, copy-editors, publishers, editorial assistants, typesetters, and readers—also need to remember that the experience that potential authors have with us may be of great importance to them and, like the DiMaggio example, may be their only interaction with *JFTR*. Despite the fact that many of us have engaged in one way or another with literally thousands of manuscripts, it is incumbent on each of us involved in the publication process to realize that the professionalism, competence, and compassion that we do or do not display can have a lasting and major impact on those we serve, primarily potential authors who are relatively new to the process. What might be a typical day for us may be an especially noteworthy day for new professionals, such as those who feel that they need this publication to strengthen their chances of obtaining tenure, to be promoted, to enhance their reputation, and/or to increase their chances of obtaining external funding for their research. We must guard against taking shortcuts or being curt, overly critical, not thorough in the provision of feedback, or slow to perform our roles, for even a small breach in our standards can have large and long-term impacts on those affected.

The importance of this principle suggests that it is important to take a moment to reflect on how we might enhance the quality of our fulfillment to our “contracts” to serve authors with dignity and competence. In the interests of doing so, I would like to offer some reflections on how to improve that performance.

First, it would be helpful if editors and reviewers were provided with some training and supervised experience before they begin to serve in their particular professional roles. One example would be to provide written guidelines, followed by discussions and perhaps workshops, regarding how scholars can effectively review journal manuscripts. I have seen some excellent documents written about best practices, but seldom have I seen editors go the next step and use these as a part of a comprehensive effort to generate a trusted pool of able and experienced reviewers.

Second, on a grander scale, I would like to encourage our excessively busy colleagues to do their very best to make commitments, within their tight schedules, to publishing responsibilities. I know that this is asking a great deal, as the vast majority of scholars are doing extraordinary work and manuscript reviewing and editing responsibilities are not generally given as much scholarly credit as are publications and presentations. I have heard manuscript reviewing referred to as an “invisible” contribution, as it tends not to receive much attention on scholarly vitae nor on academics’ annual reports. However, one way to justify making such commitments is to remind oneself that productive scholars would not be able to be so successful were it not for other scholars who, by serving as external reviewers, give of their time to make important contributions to the network of scholars in any particular discipline or profession.

As an editor, I have noted that there has been a trend for a progressively smaller percentage of invitations to review manuscripts being accepted. In the first 2 years of my term, almost 65% of our requests to review a manuscript were accepted by the potential reviewers; in the next 2 years; the figure dropped to the mid-50% range; and this year was the first year when fewer than half of the requests were either declined or not responded to. Our guest editors and I have had several situations where we had to ask 16–20 scholars before we could obtain 2 or 3 who accepted the invitation. I am certainly not suggesting that our colleagues are working less hard or less productively than they could or should, but do feel that we may need to consider some systemic strategies to increase this reviewer acceptance percentage. For example, I have long

toyed with the idea of paying reviewers a modest fee for reviewing manuscripts as a way of taking a step toward compensating them for their precious time, increasing this acceptance percentage, and likely speeding up the process, but have so far not come up with a way to address both the financial costs involved and the potential unknown effects such a payment might have on the process.

NOTES OF APPRECIATION

I have had the good fortune to work with many talented and committed individuals during the 5 years of my term. First, and foremost, I thank Anthony James for helping develop and implementing the vision for JFTR. For the first 2 years, Anthony served as Deputy Editor of the Journal, with most of his efforts contributing to the development of special issues, to guest editing several special issues and collections, to serving as an Associate Editor on selected manuscripts, and being the primary person whom I bounced ideas off. After 2 years, Anthony moved on to serve as Editor of *Marriage and Family Review* and is doing very creative work for this journal as well. I cherish any time that I have to spend with Anthony and we will soon move on to our next set of mutual projects.

Second, I greatly appreciate the efforts of JFTR's Book Review Editors. For my first 2 years, Roudi Roy and Tiffany Brown served as co-Book Review Editors and did a wonderful job in bringing several excellent reviews to publication. Roudi and Tiffany also were active members of the editorial team and we met quite regularly when we had difficult challenges to address either with book reviews or other journal issues as well. They were outstanding and professional, and made key contributions to several key decisions that we made as a journal. In my last 2 years, Erin Lavender-Stott served as the Book Review Editor and did a terrific job. JFTR is the only remaining NCFR journal that still publishes book reviews, and we take this role very seriously. The book reviews that Roudi, Tiffany, and Erin navigated through the publication process are thought-provoking, all tied to theory, and based on cutting-edge books that moved the family field in new directions.

Third, I am grateful to have had Luke Russell serve as the Digital Scholarship Editor during my entire term. Building on a foundation developed by Bob Hughes, Luke extended our social media reach in new directions that were rewarded with more downloads, citations, mentions, notifications, nudges, gentle reminders, pats on the back, and any other electronic means to alert the global scholarly community about JFTR special issues, regular articles and issues, and information about upcoming highlights.

Last, but not at all least, I personally thank the three individuals who served as Editorial Assistants for the Journal—Lindsey Gedaly, Jessica Barselow, and, most recently, Savannah Bayer. All have performed very well, being responsible for the day-to-day duties of processing the flow of manuscripts through the publication pipeline, generating data for our annual reports, and tackling projects that need to be completed from time to time. All are cyber-savvy in ways that I am not and I have enjoyed working with all of them.

WELL WISHES FOR THE FUTURE

The future is bright for JFTR. It has consistently been on an upward trajectory in terms of both quantitative indicators (e.g., Impact Factor, downloads) and qualitative indicators (e.g., scholarly reputation, perception of filling an important role in the family science landscape). Most importantly, my optimism stems from the talent and commitment of the next Editor, Katherine Allen. Katherine has plans that nicely combine already existing features of the journal with a variety of new initiatives that will extend the journal into new scholarly

directions. Katherine has already assembled a promising scholarly team to work with her on the journal and she has already learned a great deal about how Scholar One facilitates the scholarly process. We have worked closely together for the past year, and I have enjoyed every minute of our time together, building on our over 30-35-year-long personal and professional relationship. I am absolutely delighted that Katherine will be taking over and trust that the journal will continue to reach new heights under her leadership.

I conclude by encouraging the scholarly community to submit their very best family theoretical pieces and integrative literature reviews on family-related topics to JFTR. JFTR is the only scholarly journal that I know of that publishes both theoretical and review pieces, as well as book reviews, and trust that the synergistic relationship between the very best family scholars in the world and Katherine's editorial team can produce wonderful work together.

ORCID

Mark A. Fine  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1938-3526>

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