Embedding an Ethic of Care within the Editorial Process

Ellysa Stern Cahoy

"To receive and to be received, to care and be cared for: these are the basic realities of human being and its basic aims." – Nel Noddings[1]

Introduction

How does the concept of care exist and flourish within editorial work, including submitting manuscripts, the peer review process, and editing for publication? Care for the author and care for the reviewers is paramount in developing and sustaining a vibrant and responsive scholarly publication. In this editorial, we will explore care and empathy in the editorial environment and discuss current strategies and efforts to make *portal's* manuscript submission and publishing experience even more transparent and supportive to *portal* authors.

The concept of care in professional work

Joan C. Tronto describes the concept of care as "both a mental disposition of concern" and the "actual practices that we engage in as a result of these concerns."[2] Care is typically centered within a relationship. In a care-based relationship, there is the carer (the person providing care) and the person who is cared for. Nel Noddings describes two types of care: natural care (caring born of a natural inclination) and ethical care (caring brought forward by a sense of moral need).[3] Rooted in feminist theory and originating with Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings' work, the concept of ethical care considers situational needs and personal relationships within the context of rules. [4] In the work environment, we often provide ethical care, as care is not required but, through our own experiences and empathy, we determine that care is needed to help another person navigate a specific situation. Noddings explored care within the context of teaching, which has great applicability to scholarly communications. She interrogated the caring relationship between teacher and student and identified the core behaviors of a caring

educator in a learning environment: critical listening, employing affective and cognitive thinking, sharing supportive dialogue, creating a caring climate, and extending the caring climate forward through higher level actions that impact our overall ethical environment in a positive manner.[5] These core behaviors have applicability to many aspects of our work, both as librarians and scholars.

An ethic of care in editorial work

Relationships are at the heart of editorial work. Exploring the human dimension of editing—how editorial practices impact authors, editors, and reviewers—provides food for thought on embedding care in scholarly publishing. Several examples in the literature stand out and provide inspiration for prioritizing care in the editorial environment. While customer service offers a more transactional lens on care— aiding and guiding those who use a service—it is certainly one aspect of caring for another person in a professional capacity. In the chapter, "How May I Help You? Editing as Service," Ann Marie Ryan explores the relationship of editorial work with customer service. She identifies editorial work as "coproduction," where the author, editor(s), and reviewers all actively participate in the production process.[6] Ryan explains both the author and editor's roles in coproduction. The author has a responsibility to submit work that adheres to the articulated editorial guidelines. However, if an editor sees that manuscripts are being submitted without required elements, the responsibility lies with the editor to find better and clearer ways to communicate to authors the needed components in complete manuscript submissions. Similarly, the editor and the journal as a whole must meet the author's expectations, offering a reasonable turnaround time for reviewer feedback and providing formative, actionable guidance. Ryan also shares advice on addressing service recovery, or how to communicate when something has gone awry in the publication process. She notes that the editor is ultimately responsible for service recovery, and that an apology should always be provided when appropriate. Finally, Ryan points out that the editor is a service provider, and that one of their roles is to build relationships. While not every author may publish more than one article with a journal, many do, and the editor bears some responsibility in building and maintaining positive relationships and a good reputation within the scholarly community. I appreciated Ryan's focus on empathy, humility, and building relationships with the community of authors and reviewers affiliated with your journal.

The peer review process is also explored in the literature as a venue for relationship building with authors. Ideally, peer review of scholarly works is a collaborative conversation between the author and the reviewer. Through formative feedback, the reviewer helps the author see areas of needed improvement and the resulting output is a stronger, more responsive work. Karen Dali and Paul T. Jaeger look at peer review specifically within the LIS context and frame it as "a space for mentorship and collaboration."[7] Erik Schneiderhan sees peer reviewing, broadly speaking, as an opportunity to "nurture and teach."[8] In the editorial, "An Editorial Process Grounded in Empathy," Danna Greenberg highlights a tension that the editor faces in their work. She notes,

> "Similar to advice given to qualitative researchers, editors can elevate the rigor of the review process by becoming more reflexive about integrating emotional and rational understanding into their work. In so doing, we start to move from a developmental to an empathetic review process—empathy for ourselves, our authors, and the limitations of rationality as we make decisions that we hope will advance knowledge about work and organizations."[9]

I appreciated a statement from the Editors of the Academy of Management Journal on their efforts to provide empathy, respect and inclusion in their editorial roles. Though rooted primarily in their business-focused discipline, they shared strategies for their reviewers to keep an open and equitable view when evaluating manuscripts, including recognizing that not all authors have the same level of research funding, language proficiency, or research norms.[10]

Transparency and care in editorial processes

It's helpful to reflect on these readings in tandem with my responsibilities as *portal* editor. In my work at Penn State as a subject librarian and co-director of reference services, I endeavor to embed affective, positive, emotional connections within my reference, instruction, and administrative work. In the literature on care, empathy, and customer service in the editing process, I see similar factors in play, and they all point to centering the human aspect of all that we do within our work. I'm especially inspired by descriptions of caring relationships in teaching, as there is also an educational component to nearly every aspect of editorial work. Noddings' identification of the core competencies for providing care in a learning environment have great relevance to editorial work. Specifically, I see her emphasis on reflective listening as critical to the success of the entire editorial process. Noddings identifies an outcome for successful, education-based caring relationships: the cared-for person carries forward in their own practice an extension of the moral climate they encountered in the learning environment.[11] Within the editorial process, this speaks to the broader scholarly communications environment. If an author receives rich formative feedback on their manuscript, experiences a supportive and successful publishing process, and learns more about critical issues in scholarly publishing (for example, avoiding plagiarism, responsible use of artificial intelligence or learning analytics), will they carry it forward into their future interactions as an author and perhaps reviewer or editor themselves? This higher goal alone is a reason enough to pursue and develop a caring relationship in all aspects of editorial work.

Care and empathy within the editorial process is inexorably intertwined with communication. "Editing with empathy" requires that the editor use their mind and heart to guide the development of the manuscript.[12] This comes to bear in multiple ways. When reviewing a manuscript, the editor and reviewers have an educational role in providing formative feedback that is helpful to the author(s). The editor must work collaboratively with authors in the review process to help them understand and apply the feedback to their work in progress. As when we interact with our students, clear communication within the editorial process assuages any assumptions or anxieties the author may have. In addition to communication, the editor must also exercise care and empathy within the editorial process itself. These values run parallel with *portal's* commitment to mentoring

authors. In an editor's note attached to Bob Seal's 2015 *portal* editorial, "The Merits of Mentoring," Marianne Ryan provided a summation of *portal's* mentoring role:

> We were especially happy to have Bob Seal write this editorial because mentoring is an important part of *portal's* philosophy. Unlike some professional journals, portal does not pride itself on a high rejection rate. Instead, we understand that authors—particularly first-time authors—may benefit from mentoring. When a submission undergoes the double-blind review process, *portal* referees often take the role of experienced colleagues coaching their early-career counterparts to ready the submission for publication. Referees provide detailed assessments, suggesting ways to strengthen a manuscript, and review the article again after the author has revised it. Such mentoring has produced successful, even prize-winning, results.[13]

At our June 2023 board meeting, *portal* editorial board members discussed ways in which we can make our editorial processes even more navigable and supportive to authors. This discussion was followed up with a board survey to identify specific actions items in this realm. As a result of board member feedback, we have several current, author-focused efforts: increasing transparency around reviewing practices, creating guidelines for accessibility, and creating an author survey for feedback on the publishing process. These actions centered on communication and transparency come from a place of care for our authors and for our scholarly community.

With Managing Editor Anne Behler, we are currently revising *portal's* Author Guide-lines. These guidelines are a critical point in continuing to build our author relationships as they are the manual for authors preparing submissions. They may be the first form of interaction a prospective author has with our journal. Anne has recommended changes to our guidelines that will more explicitly instruct authors in manuscript preparation, and address questions that we have received from authors in recent years. Our editorial board will review the revised guidelines soon, and we will have these up on the website in the new year. In addition to the guidelines, we will post *portal's* Referee Assessment Rubric, used to guide all research article peer reviews. Posting the rubric online show prospective authors how their submission will be reviewed. We are also in the process of developing enhanced accessibility guidelines with a subgroup of our editorial board, centered on ensuring that all posted *portal* content is as easy to navigate as possible.

In tandem with these actions, we are developing more ways to communicate dy-namically with our authors. I am developing a *portal* author survey and will work with a subset of the editorial board to refine and implement this tool for author feedback. We have always received and responded to the author suggestions and comments personally; this survey will provide a manner for more systematically gaining and responding to feedback from *portal* authors, once they have gone through the entire process of publish-ing their article with the journal. We will use the feedback to continue to refine *portal's* editorial process and build on our responsive relationships with authors.

All of these changes surround one goal: expanding and improving our communica-tion process and our culture of care and empathy for *portal* authors. As we approach our 25th anniversary (in 2025!) this is an opportune time for reflection on *portal's* strengths. These enhanced initiatives are an opportunity to expand on *portal's* mentoring role through our online processes as well.

In the spirit of celebrating reflection, I'll mention that I was recently interviewed on a podcast episode of "From Concept to Creation: Uncovering the Making of Scholarly and Creative Accomplishments," with fellow Penn Staters Jen Jarson and Kate Morgan. Coincidentally, as I hadn't authored this editorial at the time of my interview, I shared my thoughts on the concepts of empathy and anxiety in the research and publishing process, from my perspective as both an author and editor. Thanks to Jen and Kate for providing such an enriching opportunity to explore emotions within scholarly work. The podcast series (including my interview episode, which aired the week of October 16, 2023) is available wherever you access your favorite podcasts, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On a final note, I'll underscore the symbiotic importance of author and reader feedback. Please keep in touch with me and our editorial team. We would love to hear your thoughts about how *portal* can continue to build upon its support and care of authors through the publishing process.

Notes

1. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 162.
2. Joan C. Tronto, "An Ethic of Care," *Generations Journal* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 16.
3. Noddings, *Caring*.
4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Nel Noddings, "The Caring Relation in Teaching," *Oxford Review of Education* 38, 6 (December 2012): 771–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047.
6. Ann Marie Ryan, "How May I Help You? Editing as Service," in *Opening the Black Box of Editorship*, ed. Yehuda Baruch et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 32, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230582590_3.
7. Keren Dali and Paul T. Jaeger, "Beyond Scholarly Publishing: The Human Dimension of Peer Review in LIS," *The Library Quarterly* 88, 2 (April 2018): 99–124, https://doi.org/10.1086/696578.
8. Erik Schneiderhan, "Peer Reviewers: Why You Gotta Be So Mean?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 22, 2013, https://chronicle.com/article/peer-reviewers-why-you-gotta-be-so-mean/.
9. Danna Greenberg, "From the Editors—An Editorial Process Grounded in Empathy," *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 22, 1 (March 2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2023.0060.
10. Elizabeth E. Umphress, Floor Rink, Cindy P. Muir, and Ivona Hideg, "Insights on How We Try to Show Empathy, Respect, and Inclusion in AMJ," *Academy of Management Journal* 65, 2 (April 2022): 364, https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2022.4002.
11. Noddings, "The Caring Relation in Teaching," 779.
12. Greenberg, "From the Editors—An Editorial Process Grounded in Empathy," 1.
13. Robert A. Seal, "The Merits of Mentoring," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 15, 4 (2015): 569, https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2015.0055.