

An Analysis of the Impact of Authorship on the Image of the Nurse Presented in Novels

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Content analysis of 201 novels published from 1843 to 1980 with important nurse characters was used to identify variables associated with nurse, physician, and non-health care provider authorship and the quality of the resultant image of nurses and nursing. Nurse authors were more likely to depict nurses as contributing to patients and other persons, being commended, using autonomous judgment, taking greater satisfaction in their career, exhibiting drive, and being engaged in the performance of nursing care activities. They also portrayed novel nurses as more nurturant, empathic, powerful, and intelligent, and as valuing service to others and scholarliness to a greater extent than other authors. Of all authors, physicians presented the most negative nurse images; they were the least likely to endow nurse characters with positive personality and behavior traits. On the other hand, physicians were the most likely to show nurses valuing and being engaged in sexual activities. The fact that nurse authors, who were more prominent during the first 60 years of this century, have given way to a dominance of physician authors during the past 20 years demands intervention by the nursing profession in encouraging nurses to become more active in this form of artistic popularization of scientific ideas and professional health care roles.

What kinds of nurse images result when nurse authors, physician authors, and other writers create the fictional world of the novel? Novels, as imaginative literature, function both as reflectors of prevailing popular values and as projectors of selected new ideas. They transmit dominant cultural values within the context of audience experience and need for fantasy, entertainment, and guidance (Wilbanks, 1972).

Nurses, physicians, patients, time, buildings, and equipment coalesce to create human experience in health care action and events, and people have an enormous curiosity about them. The basic appeal of all novels reflects this passion for vicariously exploring life and death as they relate

to means, motives, sentiments, status, success, and failure (Dixon, 1977). Scientific advancement and technological development have always involved social adjustments and accommodation to new ideas and the emergence of new values (Jones & Meadows, 1976). The rise of the physician-scientist to a lofty pedestal in the American novel has been documented by Cameron (1973), De Bakey (1963, 1964), and Norris (1969, 1970). The recent development of nursing as a profession calls for both real and symbolic redefinitions of roles and statuses of nurses as collegial health care providers with physicians, and the development of new relationships between nurses and patients.

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The old model of the physician as an omnipotent scientist-healer, created in part by the heroic presentation of this figure in the novel (often paralleled by similar treatment in motion pictures and television entertainment), must give way to more humanistic physician-patient and physician-nurse relationships (Cousins, 1979). As Cousins (1978) noted, "Traditionally, the doctor is the authoritarian figure . . . the new relationship is more in the nature of a partnership" (p. 1). Since most of the public's knowledge of science, technology, and health care comes from the mass media (Basalla, 1976), increasing the quality of nurse character portrayals in novels is crucial to increasing public knowledge of modern nursing science.

Novels, like almost all products of mass culture, reduce complex issues to simple terms for the benefit of their audience. Kenneth Boulding (1956) called the basis for human behavior the "image" in order to emphasize that it is "a subjective knowledge structure," not necessarily reflecting actuality in all of its components. If this is true, fantasy may be easily incorporated by the individual as one component in the formation of images. Boulding also illuminated the functions of the stereotyping process when he stressed the importance of stereotypes in enabling the average person to operate in a complex environment. Stereotypes share with Boulding's symbolic images the fact that they grow out of the human mind's retreat from unbearable complexity to simplicity. He revealed another important feature of stereotypes when he wrote that focal value images are often summarized as an ideal type of personality. The values in popular fiction correspond to those of the general culture because this fiction has a genuine function in the mass society: It participates in the vital business of creating public images. By embodying communal values in stereotyped situations and personalities, popular fiction offers symbolic models of ideal behavior to the members of the mass society.

A perennial staple of the popular novel has been the dramatization of the professional world of the nurse. Beginning with the characterizations of Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig as untrained nurses (Dickens, 1843), the creators of fictional nurses have included both nurse and physician authors, along with writers who had no professional connection with health care. Nurse authors who have presented fictional nurses to the public include Mary Roberts Rinehart (the best-selling American author of all time), Helen Dore Boylston, Dorothy Deming, Hope Newell, Olive Norton, and Virginia McDonnell. Physician authors

who have taken on a similar task include A. J. Cronin, Frank Slaughter, Michael Crichton, Richard Hooker, and Richard Gordon.

While the nurse authors were most active during the first 60 years of this century, the physician authors dominated the past 20 years. A look at the variables surrounding the presentation of nurses in novels by authors who were nurses, physicians, and others is instructive in revealing the quality of information about nursing that has been presented by the writers to the public, as well as the resultant quality of the image of the nurse as a health care provider. This study is part of a larger investigation of the image of the nurse in the various forms of mass media. The purpose of this study was to determine if nurse-authored novels differed from those authored by physicians or by nonhealth care providers in the quality of the portrayal of nurses and nursing.

METHOD

Sample

Novels for this study were identified through a comprehensive examination of book reviews published between 1896 and 1980 in the *New York Times Book Review* (Note 1) and the reviews and notices appearing in *The Bookman* (1895-1933) (Note 2) and *Publisher's Weekly* (1912-1981) (Note 3). For the years 1843 to 1895, a library search was made to identify appropriate works of fiction for the study. Fiction which first appeared in paperback form only (largely pulp fiction) was identified by examination of annual editions of *Paperbound Books in Print* (1955-1980) (Note 4). The criteria for inclusion of a novel in the study mandated that a novel be published in the English language in the United States and that at least one character in the book with a part significant to the plot be a nurse.

Four categories of fiction were identified. The Adult Fiction category consisted of novels almost always published originally in hard cover. The category of Young Adult Fiction comprised books published for the adolescent audience. Pulp Fiction included escapist literature with formula plots, typically published only in paperback. And finally, the category Children's Fiction referred to books written for preteen readers. For the Adult and Young Adult categories, a full census was used. Because of the large quantity of pulp fiction and children's literature, a 20% random sample was selected from these two categories. The novels for these two latter groups were randomly selected from the total number identified within

each category from the sources listed above. Due to the fact that pulp fiction was generally not purchased by libraries, it was obtained primarily through stores selling used books, garage sales, and responses to ads in journals specializing in the antiquarian book trade. It was not possible to locate every book originally identified through random sampling for inclusion in the study. Thus, additional novels were selected randomly until a 20% sample was achieved. The total sample consisted of 201 novels published in the United States between 1843 and 1980. These books contained 268 nurse characters and 87 physician characters. Nurses authored 35 of these novels, physicians 29, and nonhealth care providers 136.

Instruments and Procedure

Using the research method of content analysis, three tools were developed and tested for use in studying various aspects of the image of the nurse in the mass media (B. Kalisch & P. Kalisch, Note 5). The Unit Analysis Tool dealt with overall impressions conveyed by narrator comment, behavior of nonnurse characters, and situational contexts of the presentations. The Nurse Character Analysis Tool was developed to code each important nurse character, and similarly, the Physician Character Analysis Tool was used to code each important physician character. The latter two instruments addressed various aspects of the individuals' behavior, values, and appearance, as well as the reactions of other characters to them.

Coders underwent a standardized training program developed for the project. Intrarater reliability was determined by having 5% of the sample coded twice several months apart by the same coder. Intrarater reliability across all coders and all items was 87.1%. Interrater reliability was determined by having all coders analyze 20% of the novels in the study. Interrater agreement among all coders was 88.3%.

Content validity was established by an inductive and additive process of classifying all aspects of the image of the nurse and nursing found to exist in the mass media until all categories of new phenomena were exhausted. Instruments then were examined for face validity by a panel of experts and subsequently modified prior to actual data collection.

Convergent validity was estimated by testing the ability of certain univariate measures in the instruments to predict others in an expected or hypothesized fashion. For example, characters who scored high on warmth also were coded as being

very sociable, $r = .69, p < .01$, and kind, $r = .66, p < .01$; characters who scored high on intelligence also were coded as perceptive, $r = .58, p < .01$, and rational, $r = .47, p < .01$; and those who scored high on aggressiveness also were coded as tough, $r = .56, p < .01$.

The analytic procedures of factor analysis, principle component analysis, and investigator-assigned weighting were used to condense variables into a smaller number of indices to facilitate both the conceptual and statistical analysis of the image of the nurse in novels. Constructs were subjected first to reliability testing, using coefficient alpha (Nunnally, 1978; Peter, 1979), and then to random split-half reliability testing, using canonical correlation (Muliak, 1972). A coefficient alpha of at least .69 and a split-half reliability of at least $R_c = .58, p < .05$, were achieved for all constructs reported in this study. Predictive validity testing involved determining the extent to which certain constructs that were expected to correlate with selected external criterion measures did so. For example, the portrayal of empathy in characters corresponded with altruism, $r = .81, p < .01$, and the provision of emotional support to patients, $r = .36, p < .01$. The portrayal of power was associated with being seen in administrative roles, $r = .52, p < .01$. Nurturance corresponded with the desire to make the world a better place for others, $r = .48, p < .0001$, and value for self-sacrifice, $r = .34, p < .01$. Positive image was linked with valuing duty, $r = .42, p < .01$.

RESULTS

Demographically, both nurse and nonnurse authors depicted nurse characters similarly in novels. They were almost always female (99%), single (71%), childless (92%), under 35 years of age (69%), and Caucasian (97%). Nurse authors included a larger number of younger nurses, primarily because they presented nurses in the student role more than did nonnurse authors, $\chi^2_{(1)}(6) = 14.50, \phi = .24, p < .02$.

Nursing Activities

Multivariate analysis of variance revealed that emphasis on nursing activities was highest in nurse-authored novels; on the other hand, physicians and other authors were similar to one another, $F(18,498) = 4.13, p < .0001$. Physician authors provided the least emphasis on physical comforting, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 16.01, N = 260, p < .0003$, technical procedures, $Kruskal-Wallis$

$H = 6.97$, $N = 260$, $p < .03$, and emotional support, $F(2,259) = 3.06$, $p < .05$. Authors who were not health care providers were least likely to show nurses acting as a resource to others, $F(2,259) = 7.73$, $p < .0005$, and being engaged in education, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 17.05$, $N = 260$, $p < .0002$; they were as low as physician writers in the amount of nursing process activities presented in their novels, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 17.89$, $N = 260$, $p < .0001$. The presentation of nurse characters in expanded roles, scholarly work, and administration did not vary by type of author.

Professional Competence

Depiction of nurse characters as making positive contributions to patients' welfare was highest in novels written by nurses and lowest in those authored by physicians, $F(2,240) = 3.45$, $p < .03$. Nurses' helpfulness to nonpatient characters was more apparent in nurse-authored novels than in those of the two other groups of writers, $F(2,244) = 5.45$, $p < .005$. Physician writers were more likely to portray nurses as harming patients than were authors who were not health care providers, $Mann-Whitney U = 1146.5$, $N = 188$, $p < .03$. Nurse characters created by nurses were commended more often for their professional performance, as well as for other reasons, than when the author was not a nurse, $F(2,257) = 8.7915$, $p < .0002$. Physician writers were least likely to depict nurses being praised.

Similarly, use of autonomous judgment by nurses in novels was greatest when nurses were the authors, $F(2,118) = 3.59$, $p < .03$. Physician authors portrayed the least amount of this type of behavior in their nurse characters. Physician characters in novels were more likely to consult a nurse about a patient care problem,

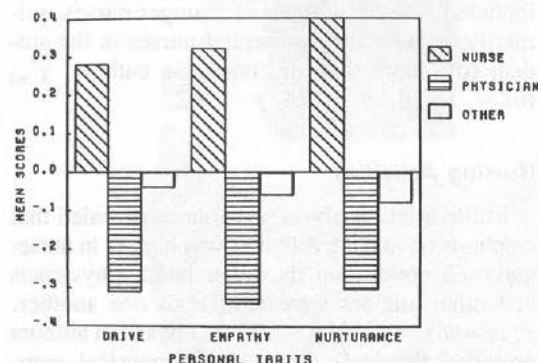


Figure 1. Personality attributes of novel nurse characters by type of author.

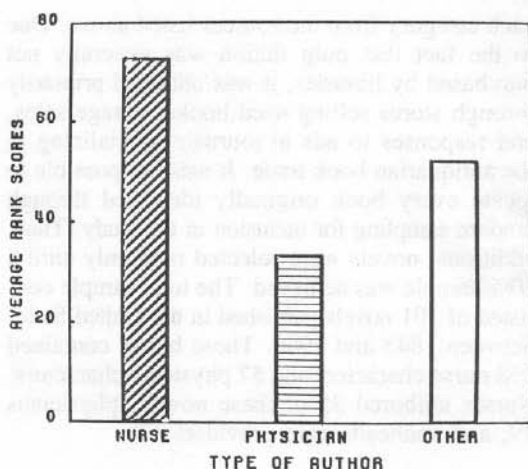


Figure 2. Portrayal of the power of novel nurse characters by type of author.

$F(2,198) = 3.13$, $p < .05$, and to treat nurses with respect, $Mann-Whitney U = 141.0$, $N = 47$, $p < .05$, when a nurse was the author.

Career Orientation

Nurse characters created by nurse authors exhibited more satisfaction with their career, $F(2,248) = 4.3564$, $p < .02$, and were more likely to express altruistic motives for choosing nursing than other authors, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 13.80$, $N = 260$, $p < .001$. Physician authors, again, were least likely to show nurses selecting their profession for altruistic reasons.

Personality Attributes and Values

A comparison of personality attributes of nurse characters by type of author revealed that nurse writers ascribed to nurse characters significantly more drive, $F(2,257) = 3.8489$, $p < .025$, empathy, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 8.359$, $N = 260$, $p < .015$, nurturance, $F(2,257) = 5.3804$, $p < .005$ (Figure 1), power, $F(2,241) = 8.8025$, $p < .001$ (Figure 2), and intelligence, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 11.18$, $N = 256$, $p < .004$ (Figure 3). Physician writers were the least likely to attribute these qualities to nurse characters in novels.

Nurse authors also depicted nurse characters as having a greater value for service to others, $F(2,257) = 5.47$, $p < .005$, and scholarliness, $Kruskal-Wallis H = 23.628$, $N = 260$, $p < .0001$ (Figure 4). As can be noted, physician authors were least likely to portray nurses as valuing service to others. By contrast, nurse authors were significantly less likely to show novel nurses val-

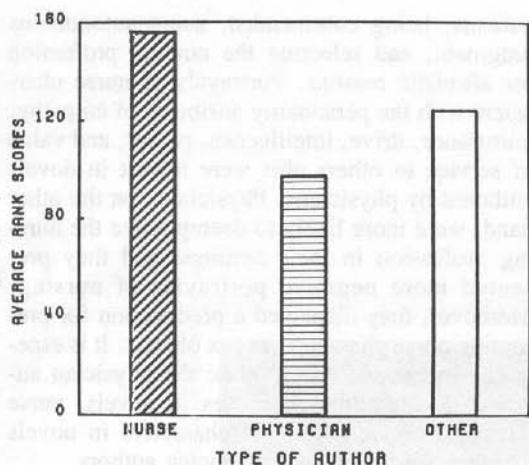


Figure 3. Intelligence of novel nurse characters by type of author.

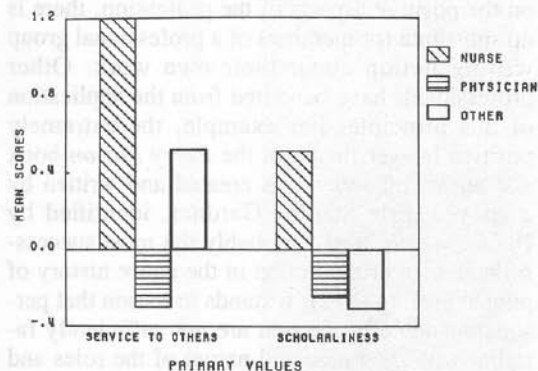


Figure 4. Primary values of novel nurse characters by type of author.

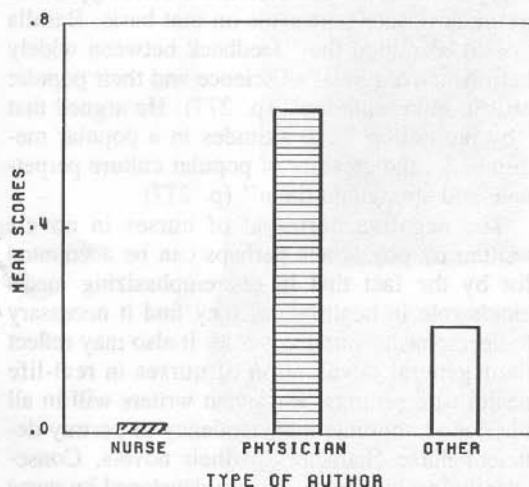


Figure 5. Value of sex of novel nurse characters by type of author.

using sex; Figure 5 graphically illustrates the fact that physician authors showed nurses valuing sex far more than nurses or other writers, *Kruskal-Wallis* $H = 8.45$, $N = 260$, $p < .02$. The propensity for physician authors to present nurses in sexually demeaning terms was reinforced by other findings. Physician writers, for example, were most likely to present nurses as having wider sexual experience than other women, *Kruskal-Wallis* $H = 5.75$, $N = 125$, $p < .05$, and as engaging in more sexual activity, $F(299) = 5.17$, $p < .01$.

Overall Image

Indexes of positive and negative images of the nurse in novels were constructed using 16 items on the Unit Analysis Tool. Analysis of these indices by type of author revealed that nurse writers were significantly more likely to present a positive image of nursing, $F(2,24547) = 18.36$, $p < .0001$, and significantly less likely to portray negative images of the profession, as compared to all other authors, *Kruskal-Wallis* $H = 10.474$, $N = 260$, $p < .005$ (Figure 6). Again, it was observed that physicians placed the greatest emphasis on negative images and the least emphasis on positive images of the nursing profession. It is interesting to note that the decade of the 1950s was the apex of positive portrayal of nursing in novels, *Kruskal-Wallis* $H = 17.26$, $N = 264$, $p < .01$. This was also the same decade in which nurses wrote the greatest proportion of novels with nursing as a theme, $\chi^2_{ml}(6) = 32.8$, $\phi = .31$, $p < .0001$.

Emphasis on Nursing

The role of nurse characters in novels authored by nurses was more central to the dramatization, $F(2,258) = 9.04$, $p < .0002$, and focused more directly upon the profession in character devel-

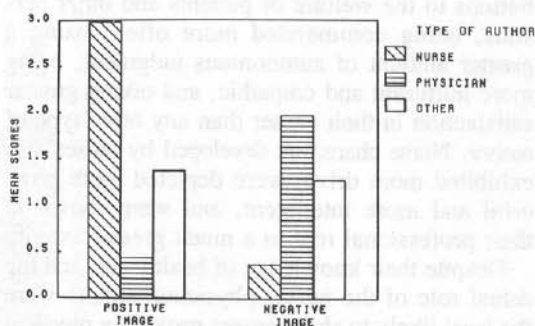


Figure 6. Positive and negative images of novel nurse characters by type of author.

opment, $F(2,256) = 7.52, p < .001$. Physician authors were the least likely of all the groups to portray nurses as major novel characters or to focus on the nursing profession.

Portrayal of Physicians

An analysis of the portrayal of physicians in novels by the three groups of authors revealed several significant findings. Physician authors made physician novel characters more central to the plot, $F(2,79) = 9.75, p < .0002$. They depicted physician characters as valuing integrity, $F(2,79) = 3.79, p < .03$, a better world, $F(2,79) = 4.08, p < .02$, home and family, $F(2,79) = 4.49, p < .01$, order, $F(2,79) = 3.77, p < .03$, and scholarliness, $F(2,79) = 5.94, p < .004$, more than either nurses or other writers. Physician authors also showed novel physicians as helping others to a greater extent than other authors, $F(2,76) = 2.97, p < .05$.

Nurse authors did not differ significantly from either physicians or other writers in their portrayals of novel physician characters except to show them as having a greater value for family, $F(2,79) = 8.42, p < .0005$, and as being commended more for professional performance, $F(2,69) = 7.72, p < .001$. It is interesting that nurse and physician writers were equal in portraying physician characters as valuing intelligence, but other writers showed physicians' value for intelligence as significantly lower, $F(2,79) = 12.84, p < .0001$.

DISCUSSION

The central conclusion emerging from these data is that nurse authors created a more positive and comprehensive image of the nurse in novels than nonnurse writers. The empirical support for this hypothesis is convincing. Nurse-authored novels depicted nurses as making greater contributions to the welfare of patients and other persons, being commended more often, using a greater amount of autonomous judgment, being more nurturant and empathic, and taking greater satisfaction in their career than any other type of author. Nurse characters developed by nurses also exhibited more drive, were depicted more powerful and more intelligent, and were shown in their professional role to a much greater extent.

Despite their knowledge of health care and the actual role of the nurse, physician authors were the least likely to show nurses providing physical comfort, technical care, and emotional support, making positive contributions to the welfare of

patients, being commended, using autonomous judgment, and selecting the nursing profession for altruistic reasons. Portrayals of nurse characters with the personality attributes of empathy, nurturance, drive, intelligence, power, and value of service to others also were lowest in novels authored by physicians. Physicians, on the other hand, were more likely to deemphasize the nursing profession in their writings, and they presented more negative portrayals of nursing. Moreover, they displayed a predilection for presenting nurse characters as sex objects. It is especially noteworthy that, unlike the physician authors' downgrading of nurses in novels, nurse writers depicted physician characters in novels just as positively as did physician authors.

Clearly, the nurse author group offered the most positive image of nursing and was more likely to give the profession visibility to the reading public than other types of authors. In terms of emphasis on the positive aspects of the profession, there is no substitute for members of a professional group writing fiction about their own work. Other professionals have benefited from the application of this principle. For example, the extremely positive lawyer image in the *Perry Mason* book and television series was created and written by a lawyer, Erle Stanley Gardner, identified by Herzberg (1962) as "probably the most successful author of crime fiction in the entire history of publishing" (p. 372). It stands to reason that persons outside a profession are not sufficiently familiar with the range and nature of the roles and responsibilities entailed in the work of that group to create a faithful reflection of reality. Thus, nonnurse writers tend to use existing media stereotypes that then reinforce those stereotypes and promote further portrayals on that basis. Basalla (1976) identified the "feedback between widely held American ideas of science and their popular artistic representation" (p. 277). He argued that "by presenting these attitudes in a popular medium . . . the creators of popular culture perpetuate and strengthen them" (p. 277).

The negative portrayal of nurses in novels written by physicians perhaps can be accounted for by the fact that in overemphasizing medicine's role in health care, they find it necessary to deemphasize nursing's role. It also may reflect their general devaluation of nurses in real-life health care settings. Physician writers will in all likelihood continue their tendency to portray deficient nurse characters in their novels. Consequently, positive nurse images developed by nurse writers are needed to counter this continuing negative depiction.

A major significance of the novel lies not only in its exposure as a medium but also in its tendency to direct the quality of other media depictions. Many motion pictures and television series owe their origin to a novel. For example, the physician author Richard Hooker wrote *M*A*S*H* in 1968. It was quickly made into a motion picture (1970) and subsequently spawned two television series—*M*A*S*H* (1972–present) and *Trapper John, M.D.* (1979–present). The novel has sold nearly 2 million copies, the motion picture is among the most popular ever, and the two television series are consistently among the top 10 in the Nielsen ratings.

Implications for Nursing

The implications of this study point to a clear need to encourage talented nurses to write novels that deal with the nursing profession. Unfortunately, the 1970s showed a severe decline in such nurse-authored fiction. The subject matter of nursing as entertainment holds great potential for exciting and hitherto undeveloped creative works, as attested to by the success of the 1978 nonfiction book *Nurse* by journalist Peggy Anderson, which made that year's best-seller list and led to a television series.

Potential nurse authors might develop their talent more readily if basic nursing education programs included more course work in the humanities, particularly creative writing, as opposed to the tendency always to direct nursing curricula toward the biological sciences. Fiction writing contests sponsored by nursing journals and nursing book publishers also might help to give visibility to and support for this type of writing. (This approach has been used by one publishing company in England.) Members of other health care professions who write fiction and nonfiction for public consumption have formed organizations, such as the American Medical Writers' Association, which offers facilitative collegial support and assistance in such efforts (Note 6). A higher valuation by the nursing profession on developing nurses as authors of fiction that deals with nurses and nursing is required if the present deficient image of the nurse in the symbolic world of entertainment is to be improved significantly.

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