Considerations on Submitting and Getting Published

David Fasenfest
Wayne State University, USA

Over the past decade, as a result of the economic crash in 2008 and the greater awareness of inequality through the efforts of the Occupy Movement, there is an increasing interest in critical sociological analysis. At the same time, *Critical Sociology* introduced a Latin American and Caribbean initiatives, then an Africa initiative, and most recently a Middle East and North African initiative all designed to solicit and publish critical scholarship from a non-US/non-European perspective. Finally, as the journal's reach is increasingly international, we have experienced a rise in submissions from Eastern European and Asian scholars. The result is greater numbers of articles vying for a limited space in our journal.

As the pressures to publish increase, reflecting the growing number of people now submitting articles earlier in their academic career—often while still graduate students to improve their efforts at securing a faculty appointment—and the limits of space in journals remain fairly fixed, it seems ever more difficult to get one's research into print. With this essay I hope to both explain the review process and detail some observations on what is expected as we evaluate submissions to this journal. First, we need to consider the realities facing the editorial board. Currently *Critical Sociology* publishes 6 issues per volume, with an overall limit of 912 journal pages for the entire volume. We have some flexibility on per-issue page counts, but target each issue to contain 152 journal pages. Without going into mind-numbing explanations, routine material in each issue usually take up between 6 and 10 journal pages, and additional production requirements often create a number of blank left facing pages within the journal issue—overall lost space. In short, at the original suggested length of 10,000 words *Critical Sociology* published on average 6 or 7 articles per issue for approximately 40 articles per volume year. Starting in 2014 we now try to limit submissions to about 8,000 words (more on that below).

We are receiving an ever increasing number of submissions and at a more rapid pace: between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2013 *Critical Sociology* received 547 originally submitted articles, 7 commentaries and 39 review essays; in that same period there were overall 691 resubmitted articles, 13 commentaries and 47 review essays. There is obviously a double count in the overall number of full submissions, but alternatively this total (1344 discrete items) reflects the total that require a first or second review. By contrast, in the first quarter of 2014 we have already received 45 new submissions and 44 resubmissions, and at this pace by the end of 2014 alone we will have processed in one year the equivalent of 25 percent of the total received in the prior 6 years combined. Clearly, this increasing demand for space in the journal has resulted in some very difficult decisions.

Part of this increase has been addressed with the introduction of electronic publication prior to print, placed on our journal webpage (see http://crs.sagepub.com/content/early/recent), allowing

authors with accepted articles to have their work read in a timely manner as they wait for print space in the journal. It is increasingly common for most journals to have articles languish for 12-18 months before getting published; it is also a problem as long backlogs choke our system.[1] Articles that are time sensitive, or that make reference to a fluid geo-political, temporal or social situation (who is holding political office, who may be on strike, what changes to labor law are proposed, etc) may find their article out of date once published. There is no easy way to update or correct an article, but once published on-line the currency of the analysis is preserved.

When considered in tandem, the reality is that increasingly we have to reject articles from authors who might, at other times, have been given the encouragement to continue working on the project, and now when asked to revise authors only get one chance to convince reviewers that their article should be published. We would like to nurture and encourage the work of more junior scholars, and indeed that sort of activity is central to the mission of a journal like ours. At the same time, we are forced to make ever more difficult decision about what should be printed in these pages.

Tips on Submitting

There are a number of factors that guide us in deciding which articles are deflected (rejected after internal considerations), and which go out for further review. Let me first focus on what happens when we first get an article. Some of these points would seem to be self-evident, but often enough we have to send the submission back resulting in a fairly quick rejection:

1) Articles should be anonymous. We use a double blind review process, so that neither the reviewer nor the author are aware of the other's identity. This protects against a "star" system of acceptances, and increased the chance new scholars will get their work accepted.

2) We ask that articles are, as much as possible, no longer than 8,000 words. Our limit in the past was 10,000 words, but by keeping articles shorter we can increase each issue from an average of 6 articles to 8 per issue. That limit is not strictly enforced, since we recognized certain kinds of research (ethnographies, for example) require more space. However, if we get an article that is over 12,000 words on first submission we will send it back asking for some significant editing. The principle is that we do not want to ask authors of accepted articles to subsequently cut 20 or 30 percent of their work to meet our guideline.

3) Articles that do not fit into our general scope of what gets published will not get reviewed. Our journal focuses on critical analyses of contemporary or historical events, or theoretical explorations, from a sociological perspective. An otherwise excellent analysis, for example of the limits of Weimar Germany's political organization, may well be rejected without further review if the focus of the article does not examine changing social forces, the rise of competing ideologies or offer some other sociological perspective on the events.[2] As is often the case, we suggest other outlets that may be more accommodating to the submission's topic.

4) We consider whether the article is written in a style that is easily accessible, and that it is fully developed. In the first instance if the language is somewhat tortured (perhaps the author is not a native English speaker, or the writing requires a serious copy editing before the argument is clear) we will send this back without further review (explaining that this version needs more attention on language). Somewhat related, if the article reads more like a work in progress with an unclear conclusion, or if it presents a generally speculative arguments that does not move the reader to a conclusion, we will suggest the author continue working on their paper before it is ready for further review.

These considerations are fairly obvious, and happily few submissions fall into this category when we first assess the article, commentary or review essay. The next step is to undertake an internal review by members of the editorial board. The purpose is to assess whether the article makes a contribution, consider whether the method and/or data upon which the argument is based has been clearly detailed, and decide on who might be appropriate external reviewers. Failing on these first two criteria will result in a rejection with some suggestions on how the author might procede; usually the author gets some direction regarding some more work needed.

On External Reviews

Once the article has been sent out for external review, readers are asked to assess the quality, originality, importance and clarity of the article. They provide a recommendation whether to accept, suggest whether minor or major revisions are needed, or recommend we reject the article outright. Those that are asked to provide revisions are given a time frame in which to return their articles[3] and a decision is made to either accept (with or without additional minor corrections), or to reject and not consider the article further.

There is one last consideration that remains a matter of internal discussion: whether or not to require submissions to meet our format requirements on first submission. Many journals require that all submissions meet that journal's requirement. We decided, for the time being, that we will not impose such a requirement on an original submission, provided that the submission is not very out of line. Simple requirements are easily satisfied prior to submission; for example, converting all footnotes to endnotes. Otherwise, all format requirements will have to be met once the article is finally accepted. On rare occasions, if in our opinion the article is seriously out of bounds (extreme font changes, odd headers or footers, strange columns) to the point that it detracts for an easy reading, we may send it for reformatting prior to sending it out for review.

Overall, we feel this journal is somewhat unique as a location for critical scholarship. While the demands on space force us to make difficult publication decisions, we are also seeking ways to expand our ability to publish important and critical scholarship.

Notes

1. We are also aware that in rare but perhaps growing numbers of situations, promotion and tenure committees reviewing junior faculty require that the article is actually in print as the committee makes its assessment.
2. This is not meant to be a literal example, but a suggestion that we focus on analyses that center on the nature, causes and consequences of power relations.
3. While we try to be flexible, authors who take too long to resubmit their article will be informed that it will be treated as a new submission. The reason is that often original reviewers are no longer able or willing to consider a revised submission after several months have passed. We try to avoid "double jeopardy" when a new reviewer reflects on changes demanded by the original reviewer.