

When Revising a Text Can Transform Your Research

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Abstract

This brief essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about the process of revising a manuscript.

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In the 2018 “Heuristics of Discovery” special issue of *Sociologica*, Andy Abbott shared the following rumination: “The art of research is knowing how to recognize when it is that you have run into something that you ought to have wanted to look for” (p. 4). Over the course of my career, I have found that my most significant research projects have tended to include such a revelation, the discovery of which has often occurred during the manuscript revision process. I will share one example of this experience.

In the 2010s I began a pilot study to assess the medical and social support needs of racialized sexual minority elders in order to determine the ways community institutions could best serve them. My prior research concerned a younger population of African American sexual minorities, so although I had not previously studied health, the award was based in a center in the medical school and pulled me in the direction of studying health and aging for LGBT groups. I collected oral histories with about 25 black respondents, and added an ethnographic component to the data collection because the lives of the people I was interviewing were sociologically interesting in ways that fell outside of the aims of the pilot award.

In addition to examining health and social support, I also wanted to study my respondents’ coming of age experiences to understand what it was like for black sexual minorities during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to act on their same sex desires in the context of the social movements of those time periods, and as many were advocating for basic civil rights. I had just finished writing a book on family formation and identity development among black lesbian women who were born during these time periods (Moore, 2011), and was curious to know more about those who had been adults during that time. I thought I would write a second book about this previous generation, this time interviewing women as well as sexual minority men. It was a nice, neat study design, and I created a great codebook that I used to analyze the qualitative interviews. Overall, I felt satisfied with where the project was heading.

However, as I began to write and rewrite, I kept hitting a brick wall. I was having a hard time understanding the full life stories of my interlocutors, and this was affecting the quality of the arguments I was able to make. As I worked with the oral histories and used them to write, I began to see that important gaps in my knowledge remained. I realized that there were *silences* in the data. My narrators were reluctant to fully share about personal experiences that involved sex work, homosexual relationships they formed with others in church congregations, or behaviors they participated in that went against discourses of respectability. While I was able to write about health challenges as they approached older age, it was only through the writing and revision process that I began to see the limitations of the data I had collected in its ability to answer deeper, more pressing sociological questions.

My solution to this dilemma was to supplement my interviews and ethnographic field notes with archival materials on African American sexual minorities who had also come of age during the period I was studying. I scoured African American historical collections and LGBTQ collections across the country and found letters, personal memorabilia, news clippings, lesbian organization meeting minutes and other matter. It took some time to transcribe, code and analyze data from these new sources, but I was eventually able to piece together in-depth interviews with 29 black, sexual minority women that originated from ten different archival collections, and incorporate them into my study. While many of the questions these new narrators were asked differed from the queries in my original interview protocol, they all came of age during a similar period as the one in which I am writing, and their experiences fit well together. This new material filled in many of the gaps from my initial data, resulting in a richer, more complex story about the lives of this population.

With archival materials in hand, I now had a new context for understanding my interview

data. The goals of the book project began to manifest themselves in a new and clearer way. In earlier drafts of the book proposal my intention was to write about how black sexual minorities understood themselves and their multiple identities in the context of the social movement of the mid-twentieth century. However, I was now writing a more foundational story about the ways community developed around sexual orientation for black sexual minorities in the period before the LGBT rights movement, and the importance of the Second Great Migration as well as gender and race discrimination in employment, for the development of sexual communities that were bounded in particular ways by race and gender. Moreover, I was now emphasizing the experiences of African American sexual minority women. The writing and revision process had helped me see what was lacking in my own data, in my own thinking, and in the larger set of literatures around sexual community, migration, and the underdeveloped story of black women's involvement in mid-twentieth century formal and informal labor markets.

Revising, I have learned, is not only about revising a text (editing, reworking, even rewriting a manuscript). If you are open to the process, it can launch a search that transforms your research project.

Careful thinking and revising at particular stages of the writing process can unearth meaningful ideas. You may begin thinking you are saying or intending to express one idea, and that idea shifts and changes, you learn how to communicate it more deeply, and/or you learn how to express it in a more expansive way. We strive for these revelatory moments but in order to get to them it can take many drafts of writing, thinking, and discussion. We have to be willing to take that time (if we are so fortunate as to have time), because it is the repeated dismantling and reconstruction of the argument that can lead us to innovation. In the 2018 "Heuristics" issue, Peter Bearman muses that when he writes, he understands that his papers are waiting for him to "understand what their contribution could be. And that takes a long time to see" (p. 14). The revision process helps us attain such a discovery if we let it.

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