Sociologica. V.13 N.1 (2019)
ISSN 1971-8853

What's Good Enough?

Wendy Espeland

Published: May 8, 2019

Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Bruce Carruthers for helpful comments.

Wendy Espeland: Northwestern University (United States)
wne741@northwestern.edu; https://www.sociology.northwestern.edu/people/faculty/core/wendy-espeland.html
Wendy Espeland is Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University and is currently a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies. She has published in the areas of organizations, culture, law, and science and technology studies, with an emphasis on understanding quantification as a formative social process. Her 2016 book, with Michael Sauder, *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputations, and Accountability* examines how efforts to evaluate institutions reshape them.

One of the most difficult lessons for me to learn about the professional side of academic life was that it is a luxury for me to wait to send something off until I think it is good enough. Left to my own devices, I typically err on the side of "not yet." There are always questions that remain unanswered, some bit of uncollected evidence that could strengthen the argument, another article to read or, the fate of all sociologists, especially those who work on living people, things keep changing. Who knows what explains this proclivity. Perfectionist tendencies? Pig-headedness? What my friends call "girl disease," the disposition of some women to be less confident of their work than they ought to be? Whatever. But "not yet" is, of course, a synonym for "never." Even in graduate school I could see this was self-defeating thinking. So, what to do?

The short answer is get over it. But, like most advice, that's easier said than done. The longer answer builds on a career of adapting my evaluations of my work, my sense of what is good enough, to a series of professional opportunities, constraints and experiences. These include things like belonging to workshops or working groups, helping to edit a journal, getting a job, keeping a job, being a reviewer; it includes generous colleagues (especially the one I married), the needs of graduate students and collaborators; and it includes deadlines, whether self-imposed or as institutionalized as tenure. In other words, good enough is always in the context of juggling the multiple roles of writer, teacher and colleague — the nuts and bolts of our profession.

I have lived a privileged professional life because I have had access to rich and varied professional experiences that people who work in cash-strapped institutions or teach eight classes a year may never have. And these experiences have provided places, resources and incentives for getting work done and making it better. Having a workshop read your paper and getting comments from a half-dozen smart people should make it better. On the other hand, such richness can amp up expectations. Evaluation, like deprivation, is relative. Learning to mediate expectations, whether it's the voice in your head or the demands of a tight deadline for a conference paper requires judgement honed from experience. For me, this often takes the form of a sooner-or-better calculation.

Like all evaluation, "good enough" is a social process, undergirded by communities, networks, and contexts. Whether it is art worlds (Becker, 1982), Nigerian novels (Griswold, 2000) or finding a good lawyer (Karpik, 2010), our evaluations are always collaborations that are marked by a combination of pragmatic demands, distinctive cultural trajectories, and the kinds of evaluative tools we have at our disposal. Such tools may be as formal as journal prestige or as informal as the disembodied voice of a former advisor. Ideally, all graduate students should have advisors who tell them when a paper is good enough to send off and offer advice about where to send it, and junior colleagues should have senior colleagues who give careful comments on drafts, and we all should have a forum for presenting our work in its various stages of doneness. Whether or not one enjoys those advantages, there are some generic questions that I use when I am deciding if something is "good enough" to send off, broad questions that apply in many contexts.

The first question to ask oneself is "What is the argument?" Good articles make a clear and convincing argument. This entails asking and answering a well defined question with sections of prose that have logical connections to each other. If you are not able to express verbally the argument in relatively simple language — a sign of mastery — it's more than likely that the written argument is less clear than it should be. Ask yourself, "Can someone who is not me read the piece and summarize my argument?" If someone does read it, ask them to restate your argument. If they can't do it, you have more work to do. Reviewers get frustrated when an argument is buried and they have to work hard to unpack it. Avoid doing this.

The next question to ask is "Why is this argument interesting? Why does knowing this matter?" My colleague, Charles Camic, a former chief editor of the *American Sociological Review* (ASR), teaches a wonderful graduate seminar on professional writing. He encourages students to frame their articles around what he calls an "Open Sociological Question" (OSQ). An OSQ is a question that is unresolved. It could be unresolved because no one has studied something before, because current explanations are wrong, because the world has changed and what we thought we knew is out of date, because we have contradictory explanations that should be adjudicated or synthesized, or because new data, methods or theory can unsettle or improve our explanations. The point is to use selectively the existing literature to make a case for why a question remains open and hence why it is interesting or important to know the

answer to it. Another way to establish that something is interesting is to say why what is explained in one context is useful to people in other sub-fields. This is sometimes a matter of identifying mechanisms that apply in many situations. One challenge in assessing whether something is interesting or not is that sheer familiarity can blunt what is original or interesting about something. Especially in long research projects, something that seems obvious to you, and therefore uninteresting, may be news to someone who has not been grappling with the same issue for years. This is another reason why readers of drafts are so helpful.

An equally important part of "good enough" is to ask "Is my answer convincing? How might one argue with my answer?" I try to imagine what objections reviewers might have. For example, are there other ways to interpret the evidence? Am I making a claim that is too broad for my evidence? How might other kinds of evidence challenge my findings? What alternative explanations might there be? By trying to anticipate objections, it is sometimes possible to counter them in advance. It is at this point in my self-evaluations that I have to manage my expectations carefully. I can always find flaws in my explanations that can lead to my failing to submit something.

Another question I find useful is to ask is, "Who is the intended (or aspirational) audience for this article?" What is good enough depends on where it is going and for whom one is writing. One important distinction is whether something is for a generalist or specialized audience. Making things accessible and interesting to a general audience usually takes more work than when one can assume that readers share more knowledge; however, specialists may be more likely to find technical mistakes.

The prestige and rejection rates of a journal also matter in determining quality. For a journal like the *ASR* or the *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)*, where rejection rates hover in the 90% range, space is tight, and multiple revise and re-submits are the norm, "good enough" means something different than it does for a chapter in an edited volume. Not that quality always correlates with the reputation of a journal — we all know of great pieces in obscure places and mediocre pieces in high profile ones; nevertheless, if one is aiming for a more selective journal, it's worth getting as much feedback on a piece as possible. And it may be worth perusing the latest issues of the journal to see if there are articles related to your topic that you can include in the framing of your OSQ.

The type of journal one writes for also shapes what is good enough. Space is rarely the same constraint in a law review as it is for other journals, so writing can be more leisurely than for a journal where every word matters. Writers are generally allowed a more distinctive voice and informal style in essays or book chapters than in mainstream journals. And if one is writing for a journal that is oriented to the layperson as, for example, *Context* is, then clarity and vivid prose are even more important than these are for other publications.

Until now, I have talked about "good enough" in relation to articles. The questions raised about articles pertain for books, as well. Writing a book is more like solving a giant puzzle in that fitting the pieces together, the structure and order of the book, is a bigger task. The luxury of more space and the capacity for greater complexity and detail is accompanied by the challenge of order and sequence. The question of what readers need to know first before they can understand what comes next is key. The overarching framework for a book often takes one of several forms. Chapters can be organized chronologically, over time. They can be organized around the substantive themes of the book as these are defined by theory or by evidence. Chapters might also be organized spatially, according to various locations, or according to different social groups if that is an important part of the argument. Part of what is "good enough" about a book is how well the pieces contribute to the whole, its flow.

What is "good enough" depends on the particular job a paper is supposed to do. It depends on its intended audience. It depends on genre and publication. Sending in an article or a book manuscript is making oneself vulnerable to reviewers and, one hopes, to an audience of readers. For me, good enough is always a compromise between what I imagine is possible and what is demanded, when. The trick is, of course, to get the right balance. I can still hear the voice of my former advisor, Wendy Griswold, telling me that "Perfect is the enemy of the good." That's not a bad thing to remember.

References

Becker, H.S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Griswold, W. (2000). *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Karpik, L. (2010). *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.