https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/9381
Sociologica. V.13 N.1 (2019)
ISSN 1971-8853

Publishing in Modern Times

Neil D. Fligstein

Published: May 8, 2019

Abstract

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

Neil D. Fligstein: University of California, Berkeley (United States)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7049-6502
fligst@berkeley.edu; https://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/neil-fligstein
Neil Fligstein is the Class of 1939 Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California. He is the author of numerous papers and books including *The Transformation of Corporate Control* (Harvard, 1993), *The Architecture of Markets: An Economic Sociology of 21st Century Capitalist Societies* (Princeton, 2001), *Euroclash: The European Union, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (Oxford, 2008), and *A Theory of Fields* (with Doug McAdam, Oxford, 2012).

The good thing about the modern era of publishing is that there are many outlets for publication. There are many journals with new ones appearing all of the time. The possibility to publish in edited volumes, often gathered from a conference, is also a siren song that is sometimes hard to ignore. The bad thing is that the proliferation of these outlets means that having others' find your work becomes harder. After putting in hundreds or even thousands of hours, your published work can go completely ignored if it appears somewhere where audiences are sparse. Given this problem, it is important for young scholars to find their way into the best outlets they can. Journals like the *American Sociological Review* have over ten thousand potential viewers while edited volumes may sell as few as 300 copies that mostly end up in libraries. It, of course, is harder to publish in the top outlets than place a paper in an edited volume. But in terms of the impact for your work, it matters a lot.

This is not just a matter of increasing your visibility to other scholars. Most universities value publications in refereed journals in their promotion to tenure. It is no surprise that junior scholars dominate such journals. There is empirical evidence that when people get tenure, they are more likely to publish in specialty venues or edited volumes where they can avoid the slow and capricious review processes that can produce aggravation. But, as most established scholars will tell you, their publications in the most important outlets are the ones that are the most cited. Established scholars can occasionally get a paper that is more hidden to become part of the discussion in a particular literature, but that is often because their reputation helps find readers. My advice is that it is ok to publish in lesser outlets or edited volumes, but your finding an audience for your work will be aided by working to raise your work to the highest levels. So, if you are a junior scholar, how can you maximize the chance to get your work published in the best possible place?

We spend a huge part of our time worrying about our research and trying to find and define research problems, figure out how to engage them empirically, and produce new and definitive knowledge. If we are lucky at the end of the process, we have something interesting to share. But it is equally challenging to find an audience for our work. My basic idea here is that thinking about research and publication without thinking about audiences is a mistake. It is important when you do your research to have a particular audience in mind for your work and preferably a debate to enter into. If you want to generate new knowledge and engage others, this cannot be done without foresight. Who are you talking to; what do you have to say; why is it important to those scholars? Pragmatically, if you don't have a sense of who the work is for, your reviewers will scratch their heads and wonder what the paper is about and be inclined to reject your paper.

Some of us solve this problem by joining ongoing research programs where our work is already recognizable by a group of scholars. Here, one finds a natural audience for what one has to say and the framing of the work is made easier by having a known corpus of concepts. The trick is to use those concepts to suggest a new or novel puzzle for the research program and offering your work as a solution to that problem. While this is by no means easy, it does imply that the question of who might be interested is pre-solved. An audience exists and as long as we have something to say, our work will find a home. Finding a home for the project means going to outlets where scholars have previously published and referring to the work that has already been presented.

But for many of us, the problem of finding audiences is more difficult. We have found something we think is really interesting and important but we are not sure how to find people who will agree. The biggest mistake graduate students make in picking projects is to fall in love with a research site and fail at the beginning to have an idea about what their site is a case of. This raises the problem of "framing." This can be done after the work is done, but it is way harder to do as one must figure out for whom to frame the project for. This problem has other implications. How you frame a paper or book will determine who the reviewers are and in the end, what readers might find their way to what you have to say.

Given that it is so much work to accomplish anything, one wants a good framing, one that will be sensible, not straw man anyone's argument, and hopefully define the broadest possible audience at the beginning of the project. It is this challenge that is so daunting to most young scholars. After working so hard and long to do anything, you now must confront the world of reviewers and audiences, none of whom have to like or pay attention to a word you say. One device that scholars use to make this easier at the beginning of a project is to set up their project as a "theory contest." By pitting two perspectives

against one another, whatever your empirical case shows can be news. Using your empirical case to illustrate what is right or wrong about the perspectives, instantly interests an audience. If your goal is to show why both have it wrong, your results can lead to a third way to think about the problem. This gives you a chance to try to set up your own research program.

These problems are quite different for junior and senior scholars. Senior scholars have done a lot of work and have lots of intuition of who might be interested in what they are doing. They are somewhat used to being treated rudely, either through rejection by reviewers or by other scholars who ignore what they have done. You learn to have a thick skin if you stay in the research world. If someone does not like what you are doing, you just move on down the road to see if you can find someone else who does. I often tell students that we are like peddlers going from town to town with our wares. In some places we sell a lot and in others, not so good. You got to get used to that kind of rejection and learn to move on.

Interpreting the signals the world sends you is often difficult. Reviewers can be capricious or vague and most of us are unprepared to take criticism. It is hard to not take it personally when you get a harsh review that dismisses our hard work. How you deal with such rejection goes a long way towards how you will do as a scholar. There are things you can do to make sure your work is ready for prime time before it goes out. My best advice is to seek out advice from people who have experience. While they are not always right, their experience will help you learn about short cuts you can take to make sure your work has the best chance to get published.

It is here that the capriciousness of the review process enters into our work. It is my experience that reviewers and editors can frequently be random. About half of what they say shows they did not read the paper carefully or alternatively reject the premises of the paper out of hand. If you are unfortunate enough to be working in a field where there are multiple research programs, which in sociology is nearly every field, you can be guaranteed that if your paper is sent to someone from one of the other programs, it will certainly be rejected. If you do not include a citation to the person who is reading the paper, you can be guaranteed to get a tougher review. What having someone with experience does is to alert you to the pitfalls of your paper. They can help you figure out if the main protagonists are fairly represented in the paper and if the relevant literature is covered. While you can't control who the reviewers are, you can protect yourself from making mistakes that can engender rejection.

But sometimes the problems in the paper are not just framing or failure to mention someone that might be a reviewer, but instead there is a real problem with the paper that you can fix. I review at least a dozen papers a year and I can tell you that the basic problem of most of the papers I reject is that the theory and literature review and often the conclusion have little or nothing to do with the empirical act. For example, when I review quantitative papers, I start by looking at the tables to figure out what is going on. Then, I read the paper to see if the story from the paper is consistent with the results. I can tell you that frequently it is not and that if I decide to reject the paper, it is most often motivated by this disconnect.

It is here that having people read and discuss your work before submitting it to review is most important. The biggest mistake younger scholars make, is to submit their papers for review before they are ready. You should make sure to present or workshop your paper at least once and three or four times if possible. You should work hard to get people who you know to read it if they will and give comments. You should work to incorporate their comments and listen to what they have to say. If someone points out logical problems with what you have done, you should fix them before sending the paper out. Going the extra mile to get it right or consider any obvious problems with what you are doing makes it more likely that your work will get a better reception once it is under review.

I love to get a chance to present work in progress. When I go in front of an audience I will always get really good ideas. These ideas will make the paper better, make it more to have impact, and increase the chances of acceptance by a journal. Win-win-win. When reviews come in, and a paper needs rewriting, you should listen to what the reviewer proposes and try to do what they want. If you get a rejection, it is ok to get mad and depressed. But when you get over it, you should try hard to listen. You can reject some of what a reviewer says as being out of hand, but you need to be able to read reviews carefully enough to know when to respond. There are no shortcuts here.

As someone who has written both books and articles, I can say that they are different art forms. A given project and its character determine whether or not I am writing a book or a paper. Often I write

papers as a backdrop to doing a book. This is usually because I am still exploring a larger theme and have not yet figured out what it will be. This can be helped by taking bites at the apple to see how things actually worked. Papers allow me to fill in details and figure out sub-themes that will appear in the book. The book operates as being synthetic, as a place to draw together a larger story. It is natural for the overarching message to emerge from the writing.

I liken a paper to a pop song. At the core of a pop song is the line you can't forget, what music writers call the "hook." A great paper is like a great pop song, in that it has one message captured by the hook that you don't forget. The best papers stick in your mind because you can sum them up in a sentence or two and their result is provocative and memorable. A book is more like a symphony. It comes in acts (chapters) and rises and falls, often telling a story. In a book, just like in a symphony, there are multiple themes that swirl around, ebbing and flowing in the text. The decision to write a book should not be made lightly. They are a lot of work and require a different skill set. It is not surprising that some scholars are article people and others, book people. Figuring out what your style is important to your growth as a scholar.

Books can be purely theoretical. Ethnography also can lend itself to books when they aid the scholar in presenting an in depth understanding of a way of life. The book form makes the most sense where the topic is historical or comparative. In terms of historical work, if you are writing about the emergence of some new feature of social life or the rise and fall of something important, then the chapters of a book build on each other. They go from period to period establishing how something previously changed into something new. Comparative work considers why it is that some phenomena appear differently in different times and places. This kind of work illustrates what is common about such occurrences and what is different.

There are many challenges for young scholars in publishing in sociology. We are currently living with a mode of publication whose rules have changed very little since World War II. Peer reviewed journals still are the gold standard for sociological work. But the competition to appear in those journals has increased dramatically as the number of young scholars who need to publish has increased. This has been met by journals with long waiting times and uncertain outcomes. The fragmentation of the discipline means that finding a significant audience is harder and harder. My advice is directed to help you control what you can control. Making your work fit into the literature by placing it in real debates, making sure your work answers potential criticisms and tries to meet those criticisms before the review process, all work to make your chance of publishing significant work higher. Since, the goal is to make new knowledge, going the extra steps not only works to make your contribution better, but also makes it more visible.