

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Three Tips for Making Peer Review Work for You

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5x49m1jr>

Journal

American Anthropologist, 112(1)

ISSN

0002-7294

Author

Boellstorff, Tom

Publication Date

2010-03-01

DOI

10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01191.x

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Three Tips for Making Peer Review Work for You

Tom Boellstorff
Editor-in-Chief

Peer review is a fundamental principle of scholarly publishing, yet scholars rarely talk about it. There are many reasons for this: peer review may seem like decidedly unglamorous work, unworthy of discussion. Peer review occupies a marginal, even furtive, place on our curricula vitae, and journals sometimes remain silent on the workings of peer review in the guise of protecting editorial autonomy.

Given this relative reticence, it is understandable that an article by the sociologist Daniel J. Myers, entitled “The Peer-Review System Is Broken” and published on August 31, 2009, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, would have garnered attention. Indeed, Sharon Stein (assistant to the director of publishing at the AAA) kindly forwarded the article to the editors of AAA journals, where it stimulated a range of comments. I find much in the article commendable, but from its title onward, the article misrepresents some of the challenges we face in peer review. Rather than review the article here, its many valid insights have inspired me to provide a “behind the scenes” look at how peer review works at *American Anthropologist*, along with three suggestions to make peer review more pleasurable and effective.

HOW PEER REVIEW WORKS AT AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

To explain how peer review works at *American Anthropologist*, it will prove helpful to review the editorial process. When manuscripts are submitted to *American Anthropologist*, I conduct an initial reading to determine if the manuscript is appropriate for peer review. This is normal editorial practice in all scholarly journals because (1) it is evident that for some subset of submitted manuscripts, it is difficult to see how they would be appropriate for publication even with major revision; (2) some subset of submitted manuscripts simply fall outside the scope of *American Anthropologist*; and (3) some subset of submitted manuscripts are so far beyond the allowed word limit, or suffer from so many grammatical errors, that authors must do an initial revision before I will even consider the manuscript for review.

Manuscripts that pass this initial hurdle are sent out for review. Contrary to claims that “editors already know what they will decide and just pick reviewers who will confirm their opinion,” at this stage I have never made a definitive

decision about a manuscript. I (and most editors to my knowledge) have not at this point in the process engaged in the kind of extended, close reading necessary to make a final decision. To obtain reviewers, I send the abstract of the manuscript in question to the AA Editorial Board and ask for suggestions (this is one reason why it is crucial that authors ensure that their abstracts accurately reflect the manuscript as a whole and are easy to understand). Particularly for a journal like *American Anthropologist* that draws submissions from a wide range of subdisciplinary, geographical, methodological, and theoretical perspectives, having an editorial board that can suggest reviewers is crucial.

Between these suggestions from my editorial board and additional suggestions offered by potential peer reviewers themselves, we obtain a minimum of three reviewers for each manuscript (but often as many as four or five). This is an area for which there is some variation: some journals are happy with only two reviews, while others seek six or seven reviews for a manuscript. However, “three to five” does seem to be a norm for many journals. Although on occasion the first three people asked all agree to review, more often six to ten potential reviewers must be contacted to find a minimum of three that will do a review.

At *American Anthropologist*, we provide a three-week period for reviewers to provide their comments to us. Of course some reviewers take longer, but even in the tardiest cases, we usually obtain all reviews within four to six weeks. This is a considerably faster turnaround than some journals, but I have found reviewers to be, for the most part, incredibly responsive in this regard: a significant number of reviewers return comments within seven days. After all, a review takes the same time to complete if it is done in the near term or languishes for two months, so why not just do it? I have found reviewers to be very generous; in only two or three cases over more than two years of editorship have I had to redact part of a review because of overly negative or inappropriate comments. Reviewers often provide pages upon pages of helpful responses: even shorter reviews of two or three paragraphs are in most cases very insightful.

Reviews play a significant role in the decisions I (and any editor, to my knowledge) eventually make with regard to a manuscript. Although the final decision rests with me alone,

I have been surprised to see that reviewers tend to cluster around a single assessment of any particular manuscript. Cases in which one reviewer waxes enthusiastic while another is strongly negative are comparatively rare. Particularly for a generalist journal like *American Anthropologist*, no editor could ever have deep familiarity with all topics and areas addressed by authors submitting manuscripts. Reviewers play a crucial role in assessing the degree to which any manuscript is responding to debates and developments in the field of inquiry in question. The process of making the ultimate decision to accept or reject a manuscript is the most laborious aspect of my editorial work, involving as it does a close reading of the manuscript in question as well as the comments of the reviewers and then the crafting of a decision letter. In this most central duty of editorship, it is reviewers who act as my closest companions and most helpful friends.

I hope that this overview indicates the pivotal role that reviewers play in regard to *American Anthropologist* and any peer-reviewed journal. My assessment is that peer review is a flourishing institution, although of course there is always room for improvement. Myers is, in my view, incorrect in calling peer review “broken,” and I would far rather have peer review in any form than the reliance on informal networks (read: cliques) that otherwise determine who gets published. However, Myers is certainly right to note that many people find peer review burdensome. This need not be the case: peer review can be a wonderful way to learn about emerging research (even in a flawed manuscript) as well as trends in one’s subfield and provides an opportunity to support a community of scholarship.

Some of the solutions Myers recommends lie on the editorial side of the peer-review process and include rejecting more manuscripts before sending them out for review, seeking fewer reviewers, and providing fewer “revise and resubmit” decisions. Different editors may find some of these suggestions helpful (indeed, they have usually thought of them already), but they are not always viable. For instance, editors of generalist journals often seek subdiscipline-specific commentary before rendering a decision, and although in my personal view six or more reviews of a manuscript is excessive, many editors (including myself) also find one or two reviews insufficient. Because I am framing these comments to an audience of fellow anthropologists rather than editors per se, I would like to share three tips that I believe make the review process more rewarding and straightforward.

THREE TIPS TO SUCCESSFUL REVIEWING

1. It’s OK to Say “No” but Then Offer Some Suggestions for Reviewers

At *American Anthropologist*, like most journals, we put together a list of possible reviewers based primarily on suggestions from our editorial board. *American Anthropologist* is fortunate to have an editorial board composed of over 50 stellar scholars, but their suggestions are based solely on their reading of the abstracts for manuscripts: they are not sent entire manuscripts, nor would they have time to read

them, if they were sent each one. Board members have no way of knowing if an abstract does not accurately reflect the manuscript it ostensibly summarizes, and, additionally, they cannot be expected to be familiar with the workload or other personal details of all the persons they recommend as reviewers. Nor is there any way that I or the editorial board can know if a person recommended as a reviewer has been recently asked to review a manuscript at another journal.

Thus, it may happen that a journal might ask you to review a manuscript that lies far from your own interests, at a point in time when other deadlines are pressing or when you face multiple requests from other journals. In any case, claims that reviewing is “burdensome” do not make sense because you can always decline to review any manuscript. Long before I became the *AA* Editor-in-Chief, I was accustomed to reviewing several manuscripts a year, and I think it a good thing for a scholar to do, but of course proportionality in one’s life is crucial. To decline at times to review a manuscript is perfectly acceptable. However, should you do so, it is always helpful to provide the journal with two or three persons who you think might be good reviewers for the manuscript in question. If you have the e-mail addresses of the persons in question handy, providing this information saves the journal some work and speeds things up.

2. Just Write the Damn Review

Writing a review requires reading a manuscript and commenting on its strengths and weaknesses. It takes X amount of time to do the review, whether one does the review within a day or two of being asked to do so or one waits until having received multiple annoying e-mail reminders after three months. At *American Anthropologist*, and to my knowledge at most journals, tardy reviewers are the number one source for delayed responses to authors and, thus, the primary contributor to the sometimes-slow pace of journal publishing about which many scholars complain (notably including those who are habitually late in turning in reviews).

A true example: A manuscript was submitted to *American Anthropologist* on August 4, 2009. After an initial reading, I sent the manuscript out for review. My editorial board responded within 48 hours with the names of five fitting reviewers, and within another few days, three of these five persons had agreed to review the manuscript in question (the other two declined). The three reviewers returned their reviews within 10, 13, and 17 days, respectively. Because of the strong positive assessments of these reviewers and my own independent positive assessment, I was able to conditionally accept the manuscript for publication on August 31, 2009, only 27 days after initial submission. I have been able to render similarly swift decisions with other manuscripts (be that decision “accept,” “reject,” or “revise and resubmit”), and in each case, the key factor permitting me to move so swiftly was the quick response of reviewers. This benefits our entire discipline and is particularly helpful to junior scholars.

3. Write the Review for Yourself

On occasion, reviewers will ask me for guidelines as to what is expected in a review. Below, I provide my official response, but in my experience what is most effective is for reviewers to write as the inspiration strikes them. Some reviewers provide almost a line-by-line critique of a manuscript; others paint in much broader brushstrokes, focusing on the overall argument. Some reviewers emphasize literatures and debates to which the author could better attend; others hone in on problems of data analysis or gaps in argumentation. No single approach to reviewing is best, and indeed one key reason obtaining three to five reviews is so helpful is that a range of reviewer styles and foci provides the author and me with more multifaceted and useful feedback, whether or not the manuscript in question is ultimately accepted for publication. Write a review that reflects your own take on a manuscript.

With this appeal to reviewer integrity in mind as a caveat against generalization, the guidelines I provide to reviewers on request are as follows:

1. Ideally, articles published in *American Anthropologist* show some kind of novel research finding or theoretical intervention; does this manuscript do so?
2. What is the general significance of the main topic or argument of this manuscript? What important questions does this manuscript address and answer? Are the findings of this manuscript related to broader issues and concerns in anthropology? (Note that although manuscripts that speak across subdisciplines are welcome, it is perfectly acceptable for manuscripts to address broader issues and concerns within a single subdiscipline.)
3. Does the manuscript adequately cite and engage with scholarship in anthropology and beyond that is relevant to its argument?
4. Some manuscripts published in *American Anthropologist* are solely conceptual analyses, but the majority engage with some kind of data (ethnographic, historical, quantitative, linguistic, etc.). Does the data and analysis presented in the manuscript adequately support its claims?
5. Note that authors are limited to 8,000 words all-inclusive for manuscripts (sometimes up to 10,000 words for a revised and resubmitted manuscript), so manuscripts can rarely cite all possible relevant literatures or present exhaustive data. The thing to consider is whether the data, citations, and analysis are sufficient to make a convincing argument that contributes significantly to some set of debates in one or more subfields of anthropological research.

I hope that these three tips will be useful as you review manuscripts and that you will at some point review for *American Anthropologist* itself. Properly contextualized, peer review is one of the fundamental activities defining scholarly

community. Done right, it is much more than “gatekeeping” narrowly construed; it opens conversations, supports scholarship, and moves inquiry forward in productive directions.

IN THIS ISSUE

The nine research articles published in this issue of *American Anthropologist* all went through the kind of rigorous peer review described above, and in each case I can testify that peer review was a constructive process resulting in stronger arguments, better organization, and more convincing claims. In his article “Direct Male Care and Hominin Evolution: Why Male-Child Interaction Is More Than a Nice Social Idea,” Lee Gettler explores how direct male care of offspring may have played an important role in hominin evolution (e.g., by allowing for a shorter interval between births), drawing in part on contemporary data involving contemporary nonhuman primates.

This biological anthropology article is followed by three sociocultural articles based on fieldwork in Europe and the Middle East. In “The Soviet Sausage Renaissance,” Nerina Klumbytė looks at ways in which the moniker *Soviet* gains new symbolic valences in Lithuania through, among other unlikely avenues, the marketing of sausages, a development Klumbytė links to questions of postsocialism, nostalgia, and contemporary transformations of “the market.” Noelle Molé’s article, “Precarious Subjects: Anticipating Neoliberalism in Northern Italy’s Workplace,” provides an ethnographically grounded psychosocial analysis of worker uncertainty in contemporary Italy, speaking to issues of globalization, inequality, and individualized risk. In the article “A Moment Dead, a Moment Alive: How a Situational Personhood Emerges in the Vegetative State in an Israeli Hospital Unit,” Nurit Bird-David and Tal Israeli address another set of dynamics around selfhood and institutional medication, but this case involves persons in persistent vegetative states—persons who seem to confound distinctions between alive and dead, as well as subject and object.

The five remaining articles emphasize ethnographic, historical, and theoretical engagements with materials primarily from the United States. In “The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to Hear God in Evangelical Christianity,” Tanya Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted bring together ethnographic and other empirical methods to pose the question: “How does God become real to people when God is understood to be invisible and immaterial, as God is within the Christian tradition?” Corinna Kruse’s article, “Producing Absolute Truth: *CSI* Science as Wishful Thinking,” explores how the kind of forensic anthropological work presented on the television show *Crime Scene Investigation* presents notions of science, truth, and justice. Robert Oppenheim, in his article “Revisiting Boas and Hrdlička: Asymmetries of Race and Anti-imperialism in Interwar Anthropology,” invites us to reconsider the work of the physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička. Though Hrdlička is now often remembered simply as an advocate for racial typology, Oppenheim shows how

Hrdlička addressed questions of assimilation and difference in a manner that speaks to continuing debates over “the political limits of Boasian antiracism.” Stephen Nash continues the focus on history in his article, “A Conflicted Legacy: Paul Sidney Martin as Museum Archaeologist, 1925–1938.” Nash examines both published work and unpublished archival materials to assess Martin’s crucial impact on “the development of North American archaeological knowledge, method, and theory during the 20th century.”

The final research article in this issue, Greg Urban’s “A Method for Measuring the Motion of Culture,” works to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding “motion as social acquisition and transmission through ‘artifacts’—both durable (like ceramic pots) and fleeting (like sounds).” Urban links this framework to a long history of interest in acquisition and diffusion in anthropological theory, from the earliest work of scholars like Tylor to contemporary interests in globalization.

You may notice that the inside of this issue of *American Anthropologist* appears different from those before it. With this issue of the journal, we debut our new interior design, which complements the new cover design that debuted in

March of 2009. Many persons, but above all the Managing Editor of *American Anthropologist*, Mayumi Shimose, helped finalize this new interior design, which I hope you will enjoy.

In addition to a number of book reviews and visual anthropology reviews, this issue of *American Anthropologist* formally debuts the public anthropology review section. Thanks to the work of the *AA* Public Anthropology Review Editors (Melissa Checker, Alaka Wali, and David Vine), Associate Editor for Public Anthropology (Barbara Rose Johnston), and members of the Committee on Practicing, Applied, and Public Interest Anthropology (CoPAPIA), *American Anthropologist* will now help review and publicize to a wide audience important work in public anthropology that contributes in myriad ways to our discipline.

REFERENCE CITED

Myers, Daniel J.

2009 The Peer-Review System Is Broken. Review. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31. Electronic document, <http://chronicle.com/article/the-peer-review-system-is-b/48187/>, accessed September 15, 2009.