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Peer reviewed

Anatomy of an Article: The Peer-Review Process as Method

Neha Vora and Tom Boellstorff

ABSTRACT In this article, we provide an unprecedented insider view of the peer-review process. Specifically, we highlight how an author (Vora) revised a manuscript submitted to *American Anthropologist* in a manner that resulted in its eventual publication in the journal. This included responding in various revisions of the manuscript to comments from the editor (Boellstorff), as well as a reviewer who has agreed to reveal her identity (Karen Ho). By showing examples of this revision process, we explore the “anatomy of an article,” illustrating how a deeper understanding of the peer-review process can contribute to anthropological professionalization and successful publishing. [methodology, publishing, editing, anthropological writing, peer review]

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that most anthropologists publish in peer-reviewed journals where revision and resubmission is the norm, and despite the fact that in many academic and nonacademic contexts such publishing is the cornerstone of influence and assessment, the actual work of revision often remains shrouded in mystery. To some degree this is an artifact of the editorial process, given that we generally protect the confidentiality of authors and reviewers. However, our experiences as editor-in-chief and editorial assistant for *American Anthropologist* have impressed on us the extent to which even seasoned scholars do not always understand the basic back-and-forth dynamics of revision and resubmission. These impressions were strengthened through ongoing conversations with colleagues, graduate students, and mentors about academic professionalization and the need for greater transparency.

In light of this state of affairs, in this article we take advantage of an extraordinary set of opportunities to show how the publication process works—in effect, to reveal the anatomy of an article. One of us (Vora) was the first editorial assistant of *AA* under the other’s (Boellstorff’s) editorship. A little over a year after leaving to take up a tenure-track faculty position, Vora submitted a manuscript to *AA*. The manuscript received a decision of “revise and resubmit,” was resubmitted, received a second decision of “revise and resubmit,” and was resubmitted again before being conditionally accepted for publication; following yet another final set of revisions, the article appeared in *AA* (Vora 2011). We will thus be discussing four versions of the manuscript in this article, which following in-house nomenclature we label R0 (the

initial submission), R1 (the first revised resubmission), R2 (the second revised resubmission), and R3 (the final version that went into production).

This jointly authored piece appears in this “In Focus” section because the idea for writing it materialized at the American Anthropology conference. At that event, we informally presented some of the editor’s letters and author responses in regard to Vora’s article; the strong response, particularly from graduate students, led us to conclude that a more extended discussion would be useful. To demystify the process of scholarly revision, for this article Vora has agreed to make details of her earlier drafts public. With Vora’s permission, Boellstorff has agreed to make—for the first time during his editorship—excerpts of his editor’s letters public as well. Finally, we are grateful that one of the anonymous reviewers who looked at the first and second versions of the manuscript has consented to make excerpts of her reviews public. We thank this reviewer, Karen Ho, for her willingness to thereby allow us to present all sides of the “conversation” between author, editor, and reviewer that are central to peer review.

In what follows, we thus interweave elements of four different texts to chart out the process by which a manuscript became a published article through peer review. These texts are (1) the manuscript itself, in its various incarnations as it was revised; (2) reviewer comments; (3) editor’s letters; and (4) the cover letters through which the author summarized how she responded to reviewer and editor comments. In three cases we provide “road maps” to this process with excerpts from these texts. Given limits of space, we have selected aspects of Vora’s manuscript that both succinctly

demonstrate the dynamics of submission and revision and are also relatively common issues in other submissions to *AA*.

As scholars, we have often heard the mantra “publish or perish.” The sense of urgency this conveys is something that many of us begin to feel in graduate school and carry into the job market, through tenure, and beyond. But how to publish, the everyday work of journal editing, and the messy product that precedes the final print version are often obscure; they are typically addressed in graduate methods courses in passing, if at all. While the article we “dissect” here had its own unique trajectory at *AA*, it also was in many ways ordinary when compared to other submissions that crossed Boellstorff’s desk. We thus chose to present areas of revision that will resonate with the broadest possible readership. Our hope is that mapping out the process of scholarly publication will be useful to a wide range of authors, reviewers, editors, and scholars, including but not limited to fellow anthropologists.

MAPPING THE ARGUMENT

One thing Boellstorff has learned from his editorial experience is that, while every manuscript has unique needs in terms of revision, authors do frequently make certain errors (Boellstorff 2008, 2010). To make our discussion maximally relevant, we focus on three such common issues for revision, issues for which the back-and-forth between Vora, Boellstorff, and Ho resulted in successful improvement.

The first of these issues can be called “mapping the argument.” Regardless of the issues addressed or methods used, at its core any article is a narrative: it tells a story. That story is deeply familiar to the author, who has typically spent years conducting research and writing up the results of

that research. However, it is usually novel to readers, even those who work on the topic in question. Indeed, the point of any scholarly journal is to present new research findings and conceptual insights; for a flagship journal like *AA*, this is compounded by the fact that the goal is to present such findings and insights from a broad range of subdisciplinary and interdisciplinary projects. As a result, a crucial issue authors often struggle to address is presenting their argument in a manner that makes the trajectory of the analysis clear to a wide readership. There are many ways to tell a story and many conceivable ways to structure a manuscript. The point is not to force one’s writing into a rigid mold but, rather, to find a convincing way to order and explain the steps of one’s argument.

In the case of what would become Vora’s article, reviewers found that the initial version of the manuscript (R0) did not map out the argument with sufficient clarity. This was particularly the case with regard to the introduction, which ideally should both lay out the argument to be presented and explain its trajectory. While many authors think that waiting until the conclusion to provide a “punchline” provides the best impact, this does not make for a well-constructed article that engages a reader from beginning to end. There can be twists and turns, surprises, and unexpected insights, but readers often determine whether an article is worth their time based on the goals presented in the abstract and introduction. Like many articles that appear in *AA*, Vora’s manuscript presented a multilayered and complicated narrative with several interconnected arguments. The introduction to R0 did not adequately tease out these complex issues, and both Boellstorff and Ho found that this weakness needed to be addressed in the revisions (see Figure 1).

The final paragraph of the introduction to R0:

This article considers how the forms of cosmopolitanism and neoliberal economic belonging available to wealthy non-citizens during Dubai’s “boom” period in the early millennium both diverged from and overlapped with the cosmopolitanism that Indian merchant narratives expressed. The Dubai government’s moves to shift the focus of Dubai’s economy away from mercantile trade networks and into large scale multi-national development projects were threatening the forms of belonging that Indian merchants had carved out in the emirate during and after British colonialism in the region, and before the liberalization of India’s economy, even as Indian merchants were to some extent part of these changes and participants in the production of Dubai as a “global city.” Though these business owners and their families, some of who were into their third or even fourth generation in the Gulf, remain classified as temporary economic migrants—by the Indian state, by the Dubai government, and in their own self-descriptions—I argue that their forms of belonging are important for understanding the on-the-ground shifts in forms of cosmopolitanism in Dubai, and in expanding our anthropological approaches to diasporic citizenship to include non-Western and non-liberal contexts like the United Arab Emirates.

In her review of R0, Ho noted that:

While it is clear that the author is making a multi-layered argument, exactly what the central, intersecting arguments are, why they are important arguments to be making in the contemporary moment in light of the literature on diaspora and migration, and how these layers articulate and fit together need to be highlighted and fleshed out. Otherwise, the full force of the author’s contributions is unfulfilled, as the main points are not tied together.

Boellstorff also emphasized in his first Editor’s Letter that this section was a priority for revision:

Mapping out your argument more carefully might help address the kinds of concerns expressed above by the reviewers. For instance, note the final sentence of your introduction... This is packing a lot into a single sentence! I would suggest pausing over this line of analysis and expanding your discussion. You’re setting out the key concepts and claims of the manuscript here, but it’s not clear, for instance, what you mean by “on-the-ground shifts in forms of cosmopolitanism.”

FIGURE 1.

In revising the manuscript, Vora focused on outlining the argument more clearly at the outset, so as to provide readers a better sense of how that argument would be articulated through the ethnographic data. This process took two more revisions and resulted in a more organized argument. In the R0 version of the manuscript, the paragraph in Figure 1 marked the end of the introduction. However, in the cover letter accompanying the R2 resubmission, Vora noted that:

I have taken your advice and unpacked my introduction, as well as moved some of the framing concepts peppered throughout the text up into the introductory paragraphs. In addition, I have included clearer signposting throughout, as well as attempted to define for the reader my terms and concepts, both as I use them, and as my informants referenced them in their narratives.

In other words, Vora brought material that had been relegated to later portions of the manuscript into the new introduction. By significantly expanding the introduction in this way, she was able to tease apart the various threads of the argument at the outset and connect them with relevant literatures and debates. As a result, in the final (R3) version of the introduction, the paragraph shown in Figure 1 was revised and also followed by this “mapping of the argument”:

In this article, I argue that Indian merchants were negotiating and narrating forms of substantive citizenship in Dubai that resembled forms of belonging that scholars have noted within South Asian diasporas located in Western liberal democratic contexts. I explore both how this was happening despite the lack of formal modes of citizenship and permanent belonging available to Indians in contemporary Dubai and in response to changes in Dubai’s migration, economic, and political policies that reduced their privileged status in the country. . . . scholars have noted that citizenship in these states is based not on liberal forms of public participation but rather on generous welfare benefits (Longva 2000; Dresch and Piscatori 2005). The increasing number of foreigners in the rapidly-developing Gulf states combined with high levels of wealth due to oil and other resources means that the category of “citizen” holds a great deal of importance (Kapiszewski 2001). However, while some scholars and non-governmental organizations tend to stress the lack of “rights” afforded to Gulf citizens, others argue that the “patrimonial state” utilizes both illiberal and liberal logics of governance in the production of citizen-subjects. . . . Several scholars of non-liberal states and of the Gulf context, however, have noted that these supposedly “rightsless” migrants are also governed through technologies and rhetorics of a free and open of

market that allows certain foreigners to succeed if they perform neoliberal self-enterprising subjectivities. . . . Within this framework, citizenship does not necessarily equal rights, and some expatriates enjoy certain forms of moveable entitlement, effectively belonging more than formal citizens.¹

This expansion of the introduction allowed Vora to more effectively set out the goals of the analysis. Indeed, by the time the manuscript had been accepted for publication, the introduction had been revised more substantially than any other part of the text. This reflected the fact that multiple reviewers emphasized the need to craft an opening that explained to readers where the argument was going. That different manuscripts have different needs for improvement can be seen in the fact that reviewers were not strongly concerned with Vora’s presentation of ethnographic data (another common area where improvement is needed in *AA* submissions) but, rather, with the overall argument. The two other areas of concern for Vora’s piece that we highlight below were addressed to some degree in revisions to the introduction but came up with regard to other parts of the manuscript as well.

UNPACKING KEY TERMS

While as scholars we often write for interdisciplinary and popular audiences, we also always engage in more focused conversations that rely on shared vocabularies. The more we use such shared vocabularies, the further we get from being able to translate their key terms to wider audiences. For a journal with a broad readership like *AA*, the goal is usually to make one’s work as accessible as possible without compromising conceptual sophistication. Reviewers for the journal express understandable concern when authors assume readers will share definitions of key terms. The recommendation is usually to carefully unpack such terms, so that the points the author is trying to convey through them are evident to the reader.

This concern with unpacking key terms arose in the context of Vora’s manuscript. One example of this involved the term *freedom*, which Vora wanted to explore as an ethnographically situated and shifting term (see Figure 2).

From page 4 of R0:

There are therefore two competing but overlapping forms of economic freedom and cosmopolitanism circulating among Indian merchants in Dubai—the neoliberal “global city” models espoused by the state and made visible through economic projects of mega-development do not encompass the same types of “freedoms” that Indian merchants reference in their criticisms of India’s economic restrictions and liberal-democratic forms of citizenship (where people can shout and yell, for example) or in the nostalgia for the Dubai Creek as a golden frontier built on male camaraderie and smuggling.

In her review of R0, Ho noted that:

The author should more clearly explain the multiple, intersecting meanings and uses of “freedom” and its relationship with citizenship and belonging. As it stands, the argument is still unclear...on page 4, the author argues that the two key forms of “economic freedom” among Indian businessmen are 1). the “global city” model” which is not 2). the model “deployed against India’s economic restrictions and liberal forms of citizenship...or in the nostalgia...” In both instances, it’s unclear what the author means to say about the informants’ and the state’s understandings: what is the global city model and the model that is not deployed? Also, is “freedom” really economic deregulation, or simply regulations that preserve monopolies?

FIGURE 2.

In response to these concerns, Vora revised this part of page 4 with the goal of delineating the two types of “freedom” more clearly (see Figure 3):

From page 4 of R1:

There were therefore two competing but overlapping forms of economic freedom and cosmopolitanism circulating among Indian merchants in Dubai: first, the neoliberal “global-city” model espoused by the state and made visible through economic projects of megadevelopment and, second, the nostalgia for the Dubai Creek as a golden frontier built on male camaraderie and smuggling. In this section, I explore these competing and overlapping forms of “freedom” in relation to the historical relationship between India and Dubai, the changes in Dubai’s economy implemented by Sheikh Mohammed in the last decade, and the role of Indian and other merchants in producing Dubai as a regional hub for “re-export” before the adoption of the newer economic models through which Dubai’s boom (and subsequent “bust”) are understood today.

In her review of R1, Ho noted that:

While the author did a good job delineating the multiple meanings and uses of “freedom,” a few questions remain with the author’s making of distinctions between “older” and “newer” neoliberal practices. It is unclear to me, for example, how and why the informants complain about India’s new “liberalization” when the author points to how these developments have allowed the reinforcement of accumulation among these elites?... Can the author more clearly state why the informants feel a “declined” sense of belonging as a way to problematize the rubrics of neoliberalism?

FIGURE 3.

As you can see in Figure 2, Ho was convinced by one revised area but brought up further issues for Vora to address in the next revision. Vora responded to Ho’s concerns in R2 by emphasizing how her informants understood “freedom”:

Although Indian merchants increasingly defined freedom and belonging through neoliberal discourses of relaxed regulation and entrepreneurial opportunities, they were threatened and challenged by the newer neoliberal market forms that were circulating in Dubai. Their understandings of belonging and practices of citizenship were therefore based on their narratives of maneuvering the system as a form of “freedom” and privileged belonging to Dubai.

She further addressed these concerns about understandings of freedom and belonging by noting that

by disarticulating political and cultural belonging to the UAE, but participating in practices of governance and political engagement with the state, Indian businessmen act in some ways as citizens, extracting rents from other migrants, influencing decisions that maintain their primacy in the market, and exercising governance over laboring classes. . . . They therefore reified an Arab and Muslim nation-state to which they cannot officially ever belong. However, their claims to belonging through historical narratives of masculine mercantile sociality also challenged and exceeded the neat temporal, cultural, and legal distinctions between citizen and foreigner in the UAE, thus recuperating the South Asian presence within Emirati national identity and imaginations of its heritage and history.

Another example of how unpacking key terms improves a manuscript can be illustrated in Boellstorff’s final editor’s letter, where he suggested that it was still the case that

too much of the manuscript comes off as “name-dropping” concepts like “neoliberalism”—you need to slow down conceptually and (1) explain clearly what you mean when you use these terms; (2) cite more carefully (and a broader range of authors) to back up your understanding of these terms; and (3) link them up to your ethnographic/historical data as strongly as you can.

One way that Vora responded to this suggestion for the final version of the manuscript was through the use of endnotes. For instance, Vora used endnote #6 of R3 to respond to Boellstorff’s suggestion regarding the term *neoliberalism*:

By neoliberal, I mean government deregulation of the economy as well as an increase in market-driven models and discourses in practices of governance and self-governance. See, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Harvey 2005, and Rose 1989.

However, reviewer comments do sometimes provide contradictory suggestions or make tangential requests that do not fit the scope of the author’s vision. While Vora agreed with the main concerns of the reviewers, in her final cover letter she also noted some areas where she chose not to revise the manuscript:

I have tried to respond to the specific reviewer comments that are not covered in your letter. However, there are some places I have decided not to make changes . . . I have not expanded on why Emirati national identity is so important to preserve/produce. I feel my explanation of demographic imbalance and the need for citizen “purity” in the face of foreigners encompasses this point.

These examples highlight several ways in which Vora worked to unpack key terms in response to editor and reviewer comments while also making editorial decisions that kept the manuscript from straying in too many directions. Because as scholars we use such terms as our very tools of thought, it can be difficult to realize how others might see them as “jargon” without careful explanation. Such clarifications need not take up an undue amount of space, as can be seen from the examples above. However, they do work to make a manuscript far more accessible to an interdisciplinary audience and often help on a conceptual level as well because the work of explaining key terms often leads an author to realize ways in which the terms are being used in an imprecise or confusing manner.

DRAWING LARGER CONNECTIONS

One hallmark of a successful research article is that the author tells a sufficiently detailed story to make the claims convincing yet also contributes to broader scholarly conversations. In other words, there should be effective engagement both with the data (ethnographic or otherwise, as in

an archaeological analysis) and with the relevant literatures and debates. This balancing act of “researching narrowly but thinking broadly” is a challenge with which authors often struggle through the revision process. In particular, the article genre provides limited space to accomplish these goals, yet all successful authors find a way to do so.

As we demonstrated above, with regard to Vora’s manuscript a key place where this kind of connection drawing needed to take place was in the introduction.

In addition, the unpacking of key terms helped Vora show her readers how she was making contributions that extended beyond her specific field case. But Boellstorff and the reviewers raised other issues in regard to drawing larger connections to the relevant literatures—particularly with regard to the linked notions of “diaspora” and “cosmopolitanism” (see Figure 4).

From page 3 of R1:

Though these business owners and their families... remain classified as temporary economic migrants... I argue that their forms of belonging are important for understanding the on-the-ground shifts in forms of cosmopolitanism in Dubai, and in expanding our anthropological approaches to diasporic citizenship to include non-Western and non-liberal contexts like the United Arab Emirates.

In her review of R1, Ho noted that:

...the author tentatively suggests expanding anthropological approaches to diasporic citizenship—can the author be more concrete and give more examples about how and why this article does exactly this, as this is certainly a crucial contribution...

In his Editor’s Letter for R1, Boellstorff drew from Ho’s comments and those of another review to conclude that:

...a significant shortcoming of the manuscript remains in regard to making the structure of the argument clear through a robust engagement with the relevant literatures.

On the pages 11–12 of R2, Vora did engage far more relevant literatures in regard to these key terms (none of the cited authors appeared in R1):

While their legal status renders them officially transitory, several scholars have noted that... both “foreigners” and “citizens” contain within them forms of hybridity that make these categories actually much more porous than Gulf states would have them be (Onley 2007; Dresch 2005; Kanna 2010). As I explore in greater detail below, my informants’... constant insertions of Indian masculine achievements in the making of modern Dubai mirrored the scholarly literature on Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism that destabilizes the idea that it is a Western, modern, or “new” product that has only recently arrived in the Gulf region...

Vora also added an endnote to R2 showing these larger connections to the literature (none of the cited authors appeared in R1):

There is a significant body of Indian Ocean literature for example that tracks pre-oil, pre-national, and pre-colonial cosmopolitanisms. See for example Allen 1981; Al-Rasheed 2005... Das Gupta 2004; Ghosh 1993... Onley 2007. This scholarship is in direct contrast to models of cosmopolitanism that imply its origins in Western enlightenment theories of the individual, and the idea that it is privileged mobile or nomadic figures who can attain cosmopolitanism... Examples of this type of definition of cosmopolitanism include Hannerz 1996 and Robbins 1998. For a fine critique of these texts see Breckenridge et al. 2002.

In her cover letter for R2, Vora explained how she responded to these suggestions:

[These reviewers were] unconvinced with my use of cosmopolitanism in the framing of my argument. In order to address this I have included literature that places Indian merchants in Dubai within the historical context of Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism. I point to how... my informants’ discourses, in fact challenge... the ways in which much of the literature on development, globalization, and “global city” forms of neoliberalization in the Gulf have treated the arrival of migrant populations and the internationalization of these spaces as relatively new. Additionally, I have also expanded my engagement with the literature on Indian diasporas in other parts of the world...

FIGURE 4.

In the conclusion to the R3 version of the manuscript, Vora drew further connections to literatures on Indian diasporas:

Indians in Dubai are important to understanding citizenship because, as diasporic subjects they impact the form of citizenship in both countries. ... For some Indians, then, citizenship is more flexible than for others. ... Citizenship is therefore, as Ong argues, an “effect of flexible strategies of governing” (1999:259), both by more powerful Indians and by Emirati institutions ... the United Arab Emirates, as home to over 1.5 million South Asians, who constitute the majority

of the population, is surprisingly absent from anthropological literature on migration, transnationalism and diasporas. I argue that Indians in Dubai are indeed a diaspora population, in that they articulate forms of belonging both to the Gulf and to India, and because the dynamics of gender, class, ethnicity, generation, and religion within the Indian communities of Dubai are specific to the context of the emirate and the greater Gulf region.

These examples illustrate how successful revision involves more than simply editing a sentence or even a paragraph. In many cases, what is needed is a systematic revision carried throughout the manuscript in its entirety. For instance, in the case at hand Vora responded to the need for drawing broader connections in the introduction, throughout the body of the text (incl. endnotes), and reiterated and further developed these connections in the conclusion. While an editorial decision of “revise and resubmit” or “reject” can feel like a blow to our research, we have tried to show here how it is possible to successfully integrate reviewer comments (both positive and critical) to improve a manuscript, whether for resubmission to the same journal or for a new venue. It is this level of systemic revision that can take manuscripts to a whole new level and greatly increase the chance that they will be accepted for publication.

CONCLUSION

When Boellstorff and Vora started work on *AA* in 2007, it was a learning curve for both of them. Having never edited a journal before, Boellstorff inherited a flagship journal that was in need of reinvigoration. Vora was a graduate student finishing her dissertation and just starting to consider questions of how to get her work published. For both of us, behind-the-scenes experiences of what Boellstorff has termed “editwork” demystified a process that can still produce anxiety, emotion, and dread, particularly for junior scholars. Vora strongly believes that her confidence to submit to top-tier journals was aided by seeing articles submitted to *AA*—sometimes by “star” academics—that were very rough around the edges but that authors improved through revisions carried out in dialogue with reviewer and editor comments. Understanding the “anatomy of an article” made the idea of writing up one’s research and getting it published less daunting. The key point is that scholarly articles are not polished objects that emerge full-formed from the minds of geniuses laboring in isolation. Rather, articles are paths; they are the result of a process of not just research but also the craft of writing. They are the product of a conversation between authors, reviewers, and editors, a collaboration whose details are usually hidden from others and referenced only obliquely in an author’s acknowledgments.

In this piece, we have worked to make a few examples of this typically unseen process of peer-review visible. In

so doing, we hope to inspire readers to work to get their research published, particularly graduate students and junior scholars who might otherwise hesitate submitting to a journal like *AA*. During the five years of his editorship, Boellstorff has been committed to making the journal a true flagship for the field, one in which scholars learn about each other’s work but also about aspects of the profession that are not always discussed in these kinds of fora. This article, along with the other two presented here, are part of what we hope will be *AA*’s continuing legacy of leadership and creativity in anthropology.

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NOTE

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1. When we provide references from the various versions of Vora’s article to show how she is responding to editorial suggestions, we do not include them in the bibliography to this jointly authored article.

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