AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

FROM THE EDITOR

How to Get an Article Accepted at *American Anthropologist* (or Anywhere), Part 2

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In the September 2008 issue of *American Anthropologist* (110.3), my "From the Editor" piece was entitled "How to Get an Article Accepted at *American Anthropologist* (or Anywhere)" (Boellstorff 2008a). In it, I discussed five tips that, based on my experience reviewing hundreds of manuscripts, would help an author get their work accepted for publication at any scholarly journal—regardless of methodological approach, theoretical framework, or subdisciplinary position. I have been flattered to find this article circulated globally, including a range of reprintings and even translations. Given this interest in discussing how to present one's research in the most effective manner possible, I have decided to provide—precisely two years after my original article—five new tips to getting an article accepted at *American Anthropologist* (or anywhere).

THE ORIGINAL TIPS

Allow me to first briefly review my five original tips for getting an article accepted. The first of these was that "professionalism counts": eliminate as much as possible grammatical infelicities and formatting oddities. Second, "link your data and your claims." Third, "avoid sweeping generalizations" because they are usually impossible to support, unnecessary to the argument, and distracting to the reader. Fourth, make "effective use of citations" to show you are aware of relevant literatures. Finally, "craft an effective structure for the manuscript" because a confusing presentation makes it hard for readers to follow your argument and find it convincing.

THE NEW TIPS

1. Show a Novel Contribution

Despite legitimate concerns about the future of academic publishing, more anthropological research is being published now than ever before. Such work appears in journals ranging from specialized to generalist (of which *American Anthropologist* is a clear example) as well as books, edited volumes, policy fora, and a range of online venues. It is a real challenge to draw attention to one's own research. Given this reality, all journals to my knowledge seek manuscripts that clearly show some novel finding or theoretical intervention.

The least effective way to argue for novelty is the "shining a light in a dark place" argument. Reviewers typically roll their eyes when encountering statements like "while there has been a great deal of research on gender relations in the United States, the question of male identity in southeastern Nebraska has received little attention." First, such claims open the author to the charge that they are insufficiently versed in the relevant literatures because it is probable that someone, somewhere, has written on the question of male identity in southeastern Nebraska. Second, the mere fact that something has not been previously studied is emphatically not sufficient justification for publishing a manuscript about that topic, unless we return to what Jacob Gruber, in this very journal, first called a "salvage anthropology" (Gruber 1970).

The world is a big and changing place, and there exist myriad possible topics for anthropological inquiry that have not yet been the subject of sustained research. But merely studying a neglected topic is not a compelling rationale for publication. You need to show, clearly and from the outset, that your manuscript has an analytical "punchline" that brings something new to the table conceptually, however interesting the substantive materials presented might be in their own right. The true challenge is to show that your research can be interesting or relevant to readers who do not share your regional and thematic foci. Take my work on gay Indonesians as an example (e.g., Boellstorff 2005): I never lost sleep that those with interests in Southeast Asia or sexuality would find my work relevant. The challenge was to present my research in a way that would make it interesting to scholars who did not share those interests. Therefore, in this work I emphasize that my research shows how an identity category from one part of the world ends up transformed on the other side of the world and argue that this tells us something about how contemporary "globalization" works "on the ground." Try to articulate such broader relevance and novel contribution throughout your manuscript—as something

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substantiated through the analysis, not tacked on in the conclusion.

2. Engage with the Relevant Literatures

To show that you are bringing something new to the table, you need to demonstrate you are pushing a conversation forward—but this is impossible unless you show you are aware of the conversation. In my original five tips, I mentioned "effective use of citations," discussing primarily the best way to quote authors. However, it is crucial not just to cite scholarship but also to engage with that scholarship. This is always challenging within word limits, but successful authors of research articles find a way to do so.

There is no single formula to engaging with relevant literatures, but I can share some approaches I have seen from authors of successful manuscripts. First, they often show they are aware of classic literatures germane to the topic of their research. Second, they often show they are aware of recent scholarship germane to the topic of their research. (*AA* receives a surprising number of manuscripts that fail to cite any scholarship published in the last 20 years.) Third, they often emphasize scholarship they find useful or inspirational, showing how they build on that work. In most cases, it is less effective to rely on a negative argument in which one argues for the value of one's research by tearing down the work of others. Fourth, authors of successful articles often avoid a "name dropping" style of citing a handful of disconnected famous writers. Instead, they show the existence of a community of scholars working on some issue and then demonstrate how their own work both fits into that community and carries the conversation forward.

3. Don't Give Us the Data Secondhand

One of the most common ways that reviewers find fault with a manuscript is to say "what the author claims is interesting, but there's not enough data provided to make the claims believable." In my original tips, I mentioned the importance of linking data and claims. A distinct but related issue is the need to present at least some of the actual data collected. This is particularly evident for manuscripts based on ethnographic research. One of the most common mistakes authors of such manuscripts make is that they provide the ethnographic data secondhand. However, most reviewers are not satisfied with an author stating that "many of the rural laborers I studied in southeastern Nebraska felt that 'I think the big cities are going to ruin our future.'" It is not clear, for instance, that a person actually made this statement: Is it a summary of many such statements or an unattributed quotation? Most reviewers (and readers more generally) would want to see some "on-the-ground" examples of rural laborers saying such a thing and ideally some kind of participant-observation data showing the broader context of the statement (rather than an interview excerpt in isolation).

Like the issue of engaging with relevant literatures, the issue of providing actual data is challenging given the word limits of the article form. But all successful authors published in *AA* or other journals find a way to do it. I have, on occasion, encountered authors who claim that their topic is so uniquely complex, interdisciplinary, or novel that they simply cannot be held to the same word limits as everyone else. My response (and that of most reviewers) to this is: if you need so much more space, then that's what books are for. All persons engaged in anthropological research study complex topics. The point of the article or essay genre is that the author must find a way to isolate an aspect of that research and present it in a convincing manner—with a clear intellectual contribution, sufficient engagement with relevant literatures, and effective presentation of the substantive data on which the analysis is based.

4. Show Us Your Methods

Although *American Anthropologist* does occasionally publish "think pieces," the majority of what appears in the journal is based on some kind of direct research. The range of methods used to conduct that research is indeed bewildering. Ethnographic methods of participant-observation, interviewing, focus groups, archival work, and the like are common, as are a range of archaeological, linguistic, and biological anthropological methods. Quantitative and qualitative methods appear in the pages of *AA,* as do forms of action research. Additionally, the majority of authors whose articles appear in *AA* use some kind of "mixed methods" approach, their methodological toolkit responding to particular field sites and theoretical problems.

In my experience, concerns that a particular method will be seen as inappropriate for *American Anthropologist* (or any generalist journal) are overblown. The much more common issue is that reviewers are simply unable to ascertain how the data was collected at all. Quite frequently, quotations from interlocutors will appear in a manuscript without a clear explanation as to whether or not the quotations originate in an interview or were obtained during participant-observation. Basic issues like how long a researcher spent in the field and what methodological choices she or he made are often unclear. It need not take up undue amounts of precious space to show how data was collected. Just a simple explanation of methods will be enough to satisfy most readers.

5. Revise, Revise, Revise

I often tell people "I do not write; I edit." There may exist people who do not set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) until all sentences are perfectly formed, but I doubt it. Most of my own articles and books were revised at least three times—and often ten times or more. Certainly there is no such thing as an article published in *American Anthropologist* (or any journal to my knowledge) that has not gone through at least one round—and in most cases multiple rounds—of fundamental revision.

My experience as *AA* editor-in-chief has taught me that one of the strongest signs of a good author is a lack of attachment to their own prose—an appreciation of the fact that revision always results in a more effective argument.

Contradictions are resolved, ambiguities clarified, and errors rectified. If a revised manuscript comes back to me for which the author in question has made only cosmetic changes, this is a sign that the author may not have the intellectual flexibility to produce work suitable for publication in *American Anthropologist.* Even if after revision, I decide that a manuscript is not suitable for publication in *American Anthropologist,* I am hopeful that the process of revision has been useful to the author, as it has been to me in the past (Boellstorff 2008b).

IN THIS ISSUE

Together with my original five tips, I hope that these five new tips for how to get an article accepted will prove helpful. What has motivated me to provide them is the realization, after several years working as *AA* editor-in-chief, that the reasons why articles are accepted or rejected tend to "clump" into a range of common issues. I promise that if you write with these ten tips in mind, your work will be more accessible and convincing, regardless of the venue in which it eventually appears.

This issue of *American Anthropologist,* like those before it, features a series of research articles that demonstrate just how diverse anthropological research can be, but all are united in the high quality of their scholarship: it is from this kind of exemplary work that I have been able to formulate my "ten tips" at all.

In "Traces of a Lost Language and Number System Discovered on the North Coast of Peru," Jeffrey Quilter, Marc Zender, Karen Spalding, Régulo Franco Jordán, César Gálvez Mora, and Juan Castañeda Murga analyze an early-17th-century word list found on the back of a letter recovered from an archaeological site on the north coast of Peru. Concluding that the list contains words from a previously undescribed language, the authors analyze the list for what it can tell us about the linguistic and cultural context of that time and place.

Lise Dobrin and Ira Bashkow, in their article "'Arapesh Warfare': Reo Fortune's Veiled Critique of Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament,*" explore a research article that Reo Fortune, Margaret Mead's second husband and partner in Arapesh fieldwork, published in *American Anthropologist* in 1939. They argue that the article contains a submerged critique of Mead not just in terms of her interpretation of Arapesh culture but also regarding how cultures in general should be represented ethnographically.

Bringing into conversation theoretical debates over language and temporality, Marcy Brink-Danan explores how forms of naming can reconfigure boundaries of the "foreign" in her article "Names That Show Time: Turkish Jews as 'Strangers' and the Semiotics of Reclassification." Questions of history and context also play a key role in her analysis of the interplay among signs, ontologies, and selfhoods.

In "Anthropology and Environmental Policy: What Counts?" Susan Charnley and William Durham demonstrate that, from the late 1960s to the present period, environmental anthropologists have included less quantitative data in their analyses. They use a case from Brazil to advance the argument that fortifying the quantitative aspects of environmental-anthropological research can complement qualitative methodologies and lead to more effective policy interventions.

How do notions of "peacekeeping" and "the international community" take form in specific historical and cultural contexts? This is one of many questions Ilana Feldman explores in her research article, "Ad Hoc Humanity: UN Peacekeeping and the Limits of International Community in Gaza." Feldman pays particular attention to ways in which these notions have been shaped by emergent conceptions of "humanity."

Andrew Beatty explores ethnographic approaches to emotion in "How Did It Feel for You? Emotion, Narrative, and the Limits of Ethnography." Asking how both literary and narrative modalities might help to present emotion more effectively, he raises important concerns regarding the limits of ethnographic representation with regard to emotion.

In "Locating Value in Artisan Cheese: Reverse-Engineering *Terroir* for New World Landscapes," Heather Paxson looks at how "terroir," the "taste of place" associated with French cheesemaking, is being reterritorialized to the United States in the context of debates over artisan versus commodity production. Paxson shows how this produces new tensions over the possible commodification of the concept of "terroir" itself and explores what this tells us about broader dynamics of economic and social transformation.

All of these research articles, like those that have appeared in previous issues of *American Anthropologist,* avoid the pitfalls I address above and in my original set of tips. Although I hope these tips will be helpful, one of the best ways to appreciate them is to see them in practice by examining a range of successful articles—and any of the research articles in this issue certainly meet that standard.

In addition to research articles, this issue of *American Anthropologist* features a rich array of reviews. Public anthropology reviews in this issue include a discussion of the 2009 UN Climate Talks and an analysis of "virtual Brazilian anthropology." This issue's visual anthropology section focuses on China, drawing together discussions of books, films, and websites. A wide range of books are reviewed in the book reviews section, helping to publicize and spur debate on new contributions to anthropological understanding. This body of review work exemplifies my goal as editor-in-chief not only to present important new research but also to build conversations and networks that can further our research, teaching, and activism.

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