

NOTES FROM PANEL DISCUSSION: “Publishing in the Top Three Journals”

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DAN MYERS

Is there really a “top three” journals in sociology (ASR, AJS, and SF) or is there really a top two (ASR and AJS)? → The standing of Social Forces within the field of sociology is much debated. Regardless, the bottom line is: (1) the top two clearly have more prestige and impact than Social Forces, but (2) a Social Forces publication is still a very good publication for a sociology graduate student.

THREE POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. ***Papers in the top journals have more novelty than the “standard” sociology paper:*** Typically, the novelty has to do with the topic and theoretical approach to framing the research question. Methodological novelty is good too, but less necessary than having a novel topic or theory.
2. ***It’s a Numbers Game:*** The top journals have an acceptance rate of 10% or less. Thus, you shouldn’t expect the top journals to accept everything that you submit. Not even the top scholars have that rate of success. You have to submit lots of papers to the top journal if you hope to have any success – don’t give up! Remember – luck of the draw is part of the process, especially when it comes to the reviewers.
3. ***Compare the Finished Product with the Process of Getting Published:*** Dan’s last paper for ASR took seven rounds of revision before it was published! Almost no one gets their paper into print on the first round. So – you have to learn about the process and figure out how to convert an R&R into a publication. The best way to do this is to become a reviewer for the top journals. Submit your name to the editors and ask for reviews in your area. If you write good reviews, you will be asked to do more! Reviewing helps you gain insight into how the process of publishing in the top journals really works. You read a lot by reading a submission, reviewing it, and then reading others’ reviewers comments and recommendations. Also, if the paper makes it to the R&R stage, you can learn how an author navigates the process of re-writing his/her paper.

OMAR LIZARDO

Weird Beliefs about publishing in the top journals:

- You need to be a genius to publish in a top journal → NO!
- Grad students can’t publish in the top three → NO – many do so.

- The top three don't publish qualitative work → NO – there is a self-fulfilling prophesy, in which this perception drives down qualitative submissions, and actually makes it easier to publish qualitative work in the top three.
- You can't just do standard OLS and get published in the top journals → NO, OLS is good enough, and in many cases, more complicated methodological approaches just end up confusing the reviewers and hurting your chances. Keep it simple unless you have a really good reason for adding complexity to your analyses.
- You need “novel” data to get published in a top journal – NO, lots of papers use well-known and studied data sets (e.g., Census, GSS, NLSY, etc.).

Other tips:

- These are general interest journals, so make sure that your work has broad appeal, and reaches people outside of our area of specialization.
- Your paper doesn't have to have direct policy implications, but if your work does, you should highlight those implications as much as you can because it will help your chances.
- Good use of theory and interesting framing of the research questions is really the key to success. Be overly ambitious in this regard and show that your work has implications for the field.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Don't assume that people will naturally drawn to your work – assume that no one cares about what you are studying, and work hard to convince them that your work matters.
- Don't assume that the reviewers are dumb – they will spot weaknesses in the paper, so be sure that you address them before submitting.
- Don't “tack on” theory – again, the reviewers will be able to spot half-hearted attempts to make your work appear more important and significant than it is really is.
- Don't argue against straw men – make sure that debates that you address in the paper are really genuine debates among those with strongly competing positions.

RORY McVEIGH

Looking ahead to the job market, a placement in the top two journals makes you stand out from other applicants – it's a huge accomplishment that will open many doors for you. Social Forces is still a great placement that will greatly help you in your career.

[Regarding Social Forces rating – Social Forces has more impact within the field of sociology than in other disciplines. The top two are citing more both within, but especially outside of the field of sociology.]

TIPS

- The key to getting published in the top journals is having a really great research question. For example, Rory can predict the success of his papers based on the strength of his question – even

before he has done any analyses or even written a word down! Original questions will force people in the field to rethink established theories and help shape debates about where the field is headed in the future.

- Use the R&R process as a way to get help from reviewers and editors. The people reviewing your work are some of the very best in the business – use their feedback and advice to improve your work and learn how to be a top scholar.
- Simpler is better. Don't move on to more complex methodological approaches unless you really have to, and/or there is a clear benefit from doing so.
- Look for the “holes” in the literature. What's missing in research in your area? Are there weaknesses in theory, or empirical/analytical issues that are unexplored?
- Don't be too narrow. You are writing for a general audience, and so your work needs to have broad appeal.
- Don't pick stupid fights. It's good to go against the grain, and you should be bold in presenting your ideas. But don't start arguments with other scholars unless there is clear benefit to the paper.
- Good data really matter. Having bad data is the kiss of death.
- Don't cut corners. The standards for publishing in the top journals are really high. So – address weaknesses in your paper, and don't simply sweep them under the rug. The reviewers will find them and it will hurt your chances of success.