Professional Practice

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THE ART AND SCIENCE OF SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

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There are some key principles that are important to keep in mind when trying to publish your scholarly work. First and foremost, publishing is a skill, just like statistics, econometrics, policy modeling, or grant writing. It is usually assumed that doctoral students and new PhDs know how to publish simply because they had read so many articles. The consumption and production of published research, just like understanding and speaking a foreign language, requires different skill sets. How to publish in top journals is not taught per se in most PhD programs. Over the years, in my role as editor of JPAM, I have designed a top 10 list of things that prospective authors should and should not do if they want to publish their work. This is what I am sharing now. It is meant to be constructive, and hopefully, it will be useful for some people.

THINK GLOBALLY

Even if your research is local, based on a small geographic area, or tiny country, you need to think globally. Keep track of global trends. For example, because of medical advances and declining fertility, the world's population is aging. This has ramifications for government funding of pensions, healthcare needs, public health-care expenditures, and poverty among the elderly. To finance many of the needs of the elderly, countries can consider modifying benefit packages for the elderly (e.g., Social Security and other nations' pension schemes, medical coverage) or changing fertility-related policies (e.g., China's one child policy, Russia's national holiday to promote fertility, child allowances, tax deductions, and credits for children) or their immigration policies. Many of the issues of the elderly are made more acute

by the decline in extended family living arrangements, partly due to the migration of working-age individuals to more urban areas or other countries with better economic opportunities.

It is important to understand global and national trends to place your work in that context and motivate your research. You need to let readers know why your policy and public administration research is important. For example, the authors of a paper on an expansion of health insurance in Massachusetts (Courtemanche & Zapata, 2013) placed the paper in the context of ObamaCare, more formally known as the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Similarly, an article that won the Vernon Prize for the best article published in JPAM volume 31 was based on data from a single charter high school (Angrist et al., 2012). Those authors placed the article in the context of one possible way of improving the learning of special needs students.

On many of my foreign trips, faculty have said, "you are not interested in what in public administration or policy changes in Thailand or South Korea or Hong Kong. Our geography is too small." Or, conversely from large countries, "you are not interested in what is happening in Russia or China or South Africa. We are too different or distant from the United States." Emphatically, this is not true! You simply must motivate the paper and make readers across the globe interested in your research. For example, a paper on deforestation in Bolivia's lowlands (Andersson & Gibson, 2007) placed the paper in the context of local self-governance and the decentralization of natural resource policies. Similarly, the authors (Schneider, Elacqua, & Buckley, 2006) of another JPAM article based on data from Santiago, Chile, placed their paper in the context of social stratification and the school choice debate. Several recent articles using data from OECD countries placed their research in the context of curbing government expenditures (Dahan & Strawczynski, 2013) and the effects of lower blood alcohol limits on public safety (Albalate, 2008); and the impacts of alternative ways of using mobile technologies to increase government efficiency in the United Kingdom (Haynes et al., 2013) or the effectiveness of ISO 9000, the most widely adopted voluntary quality certification program in the world (Cao & Prakash, 2010).

To summarize, it is incumbent on *all* authors to tell us *why* their work is relevant beyond their geographic area or sample. *Authors must tell us why we should care about their work.* Knowing about what is happening globally will help you to do this.

PICK A GOOD TOPIC

While this seems obvious, given the many paper topics I have seen, it is not obvious to everyone or alternatively, we do not share the same concept of what constitutes a good topic. Before you make a huge investment of your time and resources in a manuscript, be sure that it is possible to make a real contribution to knowledge. Just because you can do something, does not mean you should. Think about writing a paper that can really change public policy. I believe that if you think about the difference between trying to improve public policy versus writing a publishable paper or what one of my colleges calls the "LPU or least publishable unit," then you will be well served in the long-run.

When I first became editor of JPAM, Tim Smeeding asked me in a seminar I was giving at Syracuse University to provide an example of an already published article that reflected what I would have considered an "ideal" JPAM article. I thought long about that question and ultimately settled on a paper published in the *American Sociological Review* entitled the "Specific Deterrent Effects of Arrest for Domestic Assault" (Sherman & Berk, 1984). I like the idea of this paper a lot. It tackles an issue that, at the time, was a real problem for police. Going into domestic assault

situations was dangerous for the police and many police avoided such calls, partly because of the danger and partly because they considered it a private family problem. Sherman and Berk randomly assigned police responses to domestic violence calls: Counsel the abuser and let him remain in the home; separate the two parties; or arrest the abuser. Strong research designs had not previously been brought to bear on this topic. The topic was an important one and had direct policy relevance. While any finding would have been very interesting, the finding that arrest deterred recidivism transformed how many police departments handled domestic violence calls.

In addition to the above advice on topic selection, it always helps if your research is related to a current hot policy debate. Political debate and controversy is your friend. This provides an opportunity for you to create evidence for policymaking. Certain topics will always be controversial because individuals on both sides of the debate have strong ethical persuasions: abortion, fertility policies, contraception, and sex education. Some recent articles on these topics include Colman and Joyce (2011); Bailey, Guldi, and Hershbein (2013); Joyce (2013); Gross, Lafortune, and Low (2014); Lopoo and Raissian (2012); Trenholm et al. (2008); and Thomas (2012).

Other good topics relate to new and somewhat controversial legislation. For example, the two most cited or downloaded articles in JPAM over the past decade both dealt with school accountability and the effects of the 2001 No Child Left Act, Hanushek and Raymond (2005) and Dee and Jacob (2011), respectively. The No Child Left Behind Act represented a major shift in public K–12 education in this country and as such, it deserves the scrutiny of serious policy scholars. These were but two of a larger series of JPAM articles on this subject including, among others Clotfelter et al. (2004); Grissom, Loeb, and Nakashima (2014); Hemelt and Marcotte (2013); Hanushek (2005); and Rothstein (2005).

Finding an important issue on which relatively little is known is another way of thinking about good research topics. For example, relatively little is known about the merits of online college education versus traditional college education. This was not an issue a decade ago because there was little online education. However, that is changing rapidly and random assignment experiment is a great way to tease out the effects of online education (Bowen et al., 2014). Another highly controversial topic about which we have little hard evidence is the merits of the legalization of marijuana (Anderson & Rees, 2014). Can mobile technologies be used to improve public sector performance (Haynes et al., 2013)? There are quite a few research areas opening up with increasing access to big data.

Finally, methods pieces that provide understandable, transparent guidance on how to better conduct public administration and policy analysis research will always be great topics. Two of the 15 most cited articles during my editorship have been methods articles (Cook, Shadish, & Wong, 2008; King et al., 2007). I expect that more recent methods articles (Bilfulco, 2012; Olsen et al., 2013; Schochet & Fortson, 2014; Wing & Cook, 2013) will also follow suit in this regard. Knowing that certain types of articles will garner a lot of citations made me predisposed to look hard at such articles when making an editorial decision. The undisputed popularity of such articles was the primary driving force behind my adding the Methods for Policy Analysis section to JPAM.

CREATE A GOOD RESEARCH TEAM

Policy evaluations are complex. You always need a strong theoretical motivation and solid research design, defensible data and measures, and an ability to motivate your work and place it in its context in the scholarly literature. Depending on the

paper, you may additionally need to sample data, randomize treatments, construct new measures, or estimate complex econometric models. As BIG data and more newly available biomedical data become integrated into the literature (Decker, 2014; Pirog, 2014), writing strong papers will exceed the capacity of one person. During my editorship over the past decade, the percentage of single authored articles has fallen from 36 percent in 2003 to 2004 (volume 32) to 10 percent in 2013 to 2014 (volume 32). This is not by design, but rather reflects the characteristics of successful submissions.

Doctoral students should consider publishing with other students from their program. Divide and conquer the responsibilities of executing manuscript submissions. Work with your professors. They should have figured out the ins and outs of publishing and can help guide you through the process. Meet people at conferences, discuss ideas, and suggest possible collaborations. Be strategic about this and seek out people whom you respect, who are knowledgeable in your research area, and who have established track records in publishing. You cannot afford to be shy. The worst that will happen is that your request will be turned down. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

SELECT A STRONG RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design trumps statistics and econometrics. It is not possible to resuscitate a weak or flawed research design with econometrics.

On this score, the gold standard, at least in the United States, is the randomized experiment. This methodology used to be employed almost exclusively by the large policy research firms. But that has changed dramatically, particularly over the past decade. Random assignment studies in JPAM in the past year alone has covered a broad array of topics: child development accounts (Nam et al., 2013), the effect of childhood investments on postsecondary attainment and degree completion (Dynarski, Hyman, & Schanzenbach, 2013), social exchange relationships in public organizations (Jakobsen & Andersen, 2013), the use of text messaging to collect delinquent fines (Haynes et al., 2013), expectations and citizen satisfaction (Van Ryzin, 2013), and school vouchers and student outcomes (Wolf et al., 2013). While they still constitute less than half of the published articles in JPAM, the proportion of space devoted to random assignment studies is increasing rapidly. I suspect this trend is a function of a number of federal departments explicitly giving preference to this type of evaluative evidence, as well as a recognition in the profession that it is quite difficult to deal with selection issues in a way that is compelling.

Random assignment studies will never comprise the entirety of JPAM articles. Some policy questions are simply not amenable to the conduct of randomized control trials. Simulations and cost-benefit analyses are alternative and solid approaches to analyzing public policy issues. Regression discontinuity designs can prove good estimates of local average treatment effects. Instrumental variable (IV) approaches are used, but if you take this approach, you need to justify your exclusion restriction(s). Many IV papers fail to make it through the referee review process as readers repeatedly state that they do not believe the authors have a credible IV. Propensity score matching methods will never control for unmeasured or unmeasurable characteristics. Virtually, all referees know this and mention it. When using quasi-experimental methods, sensitivity analyses and robustness checks are your friends. The need for robustness checks and sensitivity analyses really opens the door to multiple methods approaches.

Finally, if you are conducting a policy evaluation, you also need to keep in mind that you must have a substantively meaningful treatment contrast. When the difference between the treatment group and comparison or control groups is tiny, it is

difficult statistically to detect a difference. Sometimes this is obvious and at other times, less so. Let us take an example of the child support pass-through: the amount of child support paid to custodial parents on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. First, readers should know that states are not required to give any of the child support paid to the custodial parent if the custodial family is on public assistance. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that a state decides to give all instead of half of the child support by the obligor to the custodial family. This seems like a meaningful treatment contrast. But then you have to keep in mind that the child support paid to low-income families is generally fairly small, so the amount of extra money received by families may be small. Further, when the income of families on public assistance increases, their eligibility and benefits from other public programs may change. The extra child support income may well mean a reduction in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits, or a reduction in benefits from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or an increase in rental payments for subsidized housing. Even random assignment studies need substantial and meaningful treatment contrasts.

USE GOOD DATA AND MEASURES

Data are widely available, but they vary in quality.

Caveat emptor. That said, there is more easily accessed, high-quality data available now than ever before. (For a long discussion of trends in data, see Pirog, 2014 and Decker, 2014.) You can choose to use these data or collect your own.

Should you decide to collect your own data (which is typical in randomized control trials), then you need to consider the measures you collect carefully. Whenever possible, unless it really does not fit the needs of your study, you should give strong consideration to measures that already have been validated. Many government agencies put substantial effort and resources into measurement and you may not need to reinvent the wheel.

IF YOUR PAPER HAS FLAWS, DO NOT IGNORE THEM

There is a world of difference between making a long list of all of the heinous problems with your work for referees and pretending that problems do not exist at all! Neither approach works well. If there really is a long list of grievous problems and you really cannot do anything about them, you should probably shelve that paper. If there are problems or issues and you can do something about them, then do it! Do not list the problems and do nothing about them, or conversely, ignore or deny the existence of problems.

When you undertake a research project, you make a series of choices given the constraints of your data. These are usually reasoned choices for which you have good motivation. You need to write your paper telling readers why you made each particular choice relative to the alternative(s). If there really is not an obvious preferred choice, you will need to conduct sensitivity analyses to see how sensitive your findings are to changes in the specification of your model. Sensitivity analyses and robustness checks can be placed in a footnote or appendix if they do not make a substantive difference in your results. However, by doing the analyses in advance of submitting your paper for consideration for publication, you probably will have averted a few negative referee comments.

Remember, it is a key part of the job of journal referees to find the shortcomings in your journal submissions. If you have swept issues under the carpet, they are sure to lift the carpet and point out your omissions. Good referees will do this constructively. Others will have a bit of fun at your expense.

GET TO THE POINT AND WRITE CLEARLY AND COMPELLINGLY

If you are submitting to JPAM or another U.S.-based journal, get to the point right away. Think about the culture of the United States. We are direct people and usually say what we think, even if you do not want to know. We do not study business cards. *Tell us your research question, the contribution to knowledge, and why we should care in the abstract and then* repeat it *again in the first paragraph.*

There are different cultural norms based on very different styles of education across the globe. Understand that the journals to which you are submitting reflect the norms of the locations where they are located. For a U.S.-based journal, modesty about your contribution is self-defeating. *You need to be explicit about your contributions.* Starting with Plato and Socrates and working your way slowly to Karl Marx and finally telling us your research question on page 35 is also self-defeating. You will have used up a good amount of the referees' time unnecessarily, and they will not be happy. Get to the point, write clearly, and motivate your choices.

JPAM is increasingly internationalized (submissions, publications, and readership), and I do not see this trend reversing. Many prospective authors are writing in their second or third languages when they submit to JPAM. Your writing needs to be sufficiently understandable that we know what you want to convey. Sadly, this is not always the case. Here is a situation where working in a team has the potential to help you substantially. If you can create a research team that includes a native English speaker, you will be better off. If your English is understandable but *slightly* imperfect, you can improve the language as the paper progresses in the review process and eventually work with the journal's copy editor.

If your paper falls in between totally incomprehensible and just slightly imperfect, then you would benefit from having a native English speaking colleague edit your paper. Using a native English speaking buddy, wife, husband, neighbor could backfire because most JPAM submissions have a large technical component that will be meaningless to most native English speakers. A well-intentioned friend could easily change the meaning of what you have written. At the end of the day, you need to remember that some referees will consider your work sloppy if the writing is sloppy, so act accordingly.

You might think that the issue of poor writing was confined to foreign submitters of manuscripts. Not so. There are many native English speakers who submit papers that are poorly written and poorly organized. Think about creating an outline of your article before you start writing. Put text and thoughts related to each section under the appropriate header. Put everything down. Only when you are done with this, start to organize the text within a given section. Then begin to write. Tackle each section, one at a time. If this fails, get a co-author who is a better writer and take writing lessons. I have sent doctoral students for writing lessons. It is simply another skill that has to be learned.

Finally, keep in mind that it is impossible to write clearly if you do not really understand what you want to say. If you are unclear in your mind, take a walk or put aside the paper or do some more research, but do not try to explain something that you do not really understand. This never works irrespective of your writing skill level.

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IS YOUR FRIEND, ESPECIALLY *BEFORE* YOU SUBMIT YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO A JOURNAL

Whenever your work is close to being ready for journal submission, start presenting that paper. It does not matter if it is at your university, another university, at a conference, or another venue. Bring a pad of paper with you when you make your presentation, and when someone makes a good suggestion write it down. Then when you go back to your desk, make the recommended changes.

Think of presentations and constructive feedback from colleagues as a great way of improving your work. If you have limited opportunities for presenting your work, then send your paper to colleagues and ask them to read it critically and provide feedback that will help you to improve your work. You can create a group of colleagues working in the same broad areas who agree to do this for one another. They need not be at your institution. Many policy programs are too small to hire more than one or two people in a given field. With e-mail and Skype, geographic limitations on this kind of working group no longer exist.

BE STRATEGIC

Actually, look at the journal to which you are submitting your paper. Find articles that are related to yours. If there are none, this should give you pause. Unless you are working in a new area of inquiry, you should find some papers related to your topic if you are submitting to a journal. If you do not, you should probably find another journal. If you find related papers, cite them in your submission. Your work might improve on these papers, complement them, provide new insights on their findings, or allow a fuller interpretation of their findings. At least some of these authors are likely to be your referees. Failing to acknowledge their contributions, particularly in the same journal to which you are submitting, just makes your referees unhappy. Let it suffice to say that you really do not want to make your referees unhappy over something that is so easy to fix.

There are a fair number of people who submit papers to JPAM who I believe have never really read a JPAM article or even viewed the table of contents. These papers generally fall outside the scope of JPAM. When they are good papers and the JPAM editorial team members can think of another potential outlet, we desk reject the paper and redirect the authors to a more appropriate publication. Other times, the papers are so different from what we publish that we really do not know of a good alternative. However, you will save yourself time and effort if your paper is a good match for the journal, and the best way to do this is to read a couple of papers and peruse the table of contents of a few issues.

GET IT OFF YOUR DESK

Constructive feedback is great, but after a point it should not become an excuse for not submitting your paper to a journal. One hundred percent of the papers on your desk and in your files or on your floor will not be published. At some point, you must cut the cord and submit the paper. Let it go. You will never make a difference in the world or get a job or tenure or that cherished promotion because you have a big stack of papers.

Eventually, you will receive a decision letter about your submission. It will be a desk rejection, rejection (with external reviews), a request for revisions, a conditional acceptance, or an acceptance. It is pretty much impossible to get a conditional acceptance or an acceptance the first time you submit your paper to JPAM and other highly competitive journals. The best you can normally hope for is a request for revisions. If you get a request for revisions, the editor has opened the door!

If you get a request for revisions, you will get referee reports with recommendations for change and possibly editorial suggests for additional changes. Read these carefully and *undertake all of the revisions that make sense or are possible*. You do not have to make every recommended change although you should be able to demonstrate that you have made a substantial effort to satisfy the editors and referees. Do not make a modest or cursory change when a more time consuming effort would produce a real improvement.

In addition to making many of the recommended changes to your manuscript, you need to write a *detailed* letter to the editor and referees explaining how you responded to their recommendations. This letter is important. It is in this letter that you can explain why some recommendations may have been misguided or why it is not possible or does not really make sense to undertake other revisions. Be professional and do not ridicule your referees, even if you find some of the recommendations to be off the mark. The referees will see these letters. A one- or two-page letter will not normally cut it. I recommend you consolidate the referee and editor recommendations into one document, combining those comments that are virtually the same. Under each recommendation, tell the editors and referees what you did and where to find it in your revised manuscript. You need not do this for small grammatical changes. Just indicate in one sentence that you made all of the recommended grammatical changes and thank the referees for their careful reading of your manuscript. Referees do not want to read your old manuscript, your new manuscript, and all of the referee reports. You need to make this easy for them, and the way to do this is to write a detailed letter.

If your manuscript is rejected, you have several alternative courses of action. What you choose to do will depend on the nature of the rejection letter. If the paper was desk rejected and is outside the journal's scope, you should find a journal that better matches your research. This does not mean that you should automatically go to a less-competitive journal. It means you should take the time to figure out which journals publish work similar to that found in this particular manuscript.

If the paper was desk rejected or rejected with reviews and the editors and referees point out problems in the paper, fix the problems. Rewrite, reestimate your models, and rework the paper until it is better. Depression, anger, frustration, and angst may be real feelings but after a day or two, get going on your revisions. Select a new journal and submit the revised manuscript. If you were able to address the important problems in your referee reports and editorial comments, you can send an e-mail to the editor where you originally submitted your work and ask if (s)he would consider your substantially revised manuscript as a de novo submission. If not, go to an alternative publication outlet. With over 500 submissions a year and only about 32 feature articles, some very good work gets rejected from JPAM, work that really deserves to be published in good journals.

If you get comments and recommendations for changes from referees or the editorial team, you should not ignore them. I have received many notes from referees over the past decade saying something like, "I have already reviewed this manuscript for two other journals and the authors have not made any of the recommended changes. Without these changes, I still believe the paper should be rejected." Because the top economic and policy and public administration journals share the same pool of referees, this is far more common than you might think, so do the hard work it will take to improve your paper. Or alternatively, do the hard work and show that the different analyses did not make a difference. There is no way around doing the hard work.

I have two concluding points. First, you will not be published without doing the hard work. That said, keep the role of scholarly publishing in perspective and try to maintain a good work–life balance. Get a hobby, enjoy your family, time away from your computer can recharge your batteries, clear your mind, and it is healthy. Maintaining a healthy work–life balance is important.

Finally, let me conclude by providing a little encouragement. Scholarly publishing is a skill, part art, part science. As with ice skating, basketball, dancing, or playing a musical instrument, the skill improves with practice over time. Even though they may not choose to discuss it, every well-known scholar has received lots of rejection

letters in his or her time. There is a learning curve; but to move up the curve, you have to stay in the game.

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