

Book Editor's Note for Novice Reviewers

After several years as book review editor for *Sociological Research Online* it is time for me to put some of my experiences on paper. This short reflective paper aims to help potential contributors to write a 'better', 'more useful' or even 'more interesting' book review.

Where to start: four steps

Most instructions for reviewing books would start with the obvious key instruction: "Read the book", but I would introduce one preliminary, more basic, step which is: "Volunteer to do review a book on a topic or theoretical perspective you know something about, or you need to know something about." This would ensure that you have enough (appropriate?) motivation to complete the review.

The next step before reading the book is to read the journal's instructions for book reviewers. As with any publication, the important first step is to get passed the editor. One way to help your book review on the way is to follow the journal's instructions on style, word length, lay-out, and so on. As Tim Albert (1996: 3) recommended to budding scientific authors: "Don't buck the trend. Follow the style." *Sociological Research Online* lists its 'Notes for Contributors' on the following webpage:

<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/info/style.html>.

Finally, if you have not written a book review before read a few reviews (published in the journal you are about to submit to) before you start writing your own. You'll see that book reviews published in the same journal have differ, some have a very factual style, others a more personal one. At the same time some book reviews are glowing, whilst others are quite damning.

So when you start reading the book, keep notes on good quotes, interesting or bad sections to refer to in your review. I always write in the books I review, using a highlight pen and adding wee comments in the margin. When it comes to drafting the review I write the structure and add some of my highlighted passages from the text as illustrations.

Content of the review

A good book review should inform the reader about the context, style, coverage and/or quality of the book in an engaging and perhaps even entertaining way. It should also include some kind of judgement on the book. The instructions for *Sociological Research Online* put a caveat on such judgement, namely: "The evaluative content of reviews should, however, be constructively expressed; overly or destructively critical reviews will not be accepted" (see: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/info/style.html>). It is easy to criticise, and sometimes legitimately so, but it is much harder to provide some positive guidance along the lines of: "The author should have organised the material in a very different order for the following reasons", or "The book misses the point on Marx's theory of XX, because"

Thus when reading the book you are reviewing ask yourself some obvious questions, such as: "What is the book about?"; "What is the scope of the book, or the theoretical conviction of its author?"; "Who is the book aimed at?"; "Who is most likely to read it?"; "Why has this book been published now?", and so on. Answers to many of these

questions can be found (or perhaps should have been provided) in the Introduction of the book, where the author (hopefully) outlines her reasons for writing the book in the first place. Understanding what the author is attempting to achieve with the book, can help you critique it. You can give an assessment to what extent the author has achieved her aims with the book.

More detailed questions can be about the way the topic is outlined, for example in great detail or as a general overview. How appropriate that is will depend on the target audience, as an undergraduate sociology text book should have a different style and approach than a specialist research text. In addition, it is also of value to reflect on your own reaction to the book, in simple terms: “Do you like it, why or why not?”; “Is it exiting or boring?”; “Is it easy to read and understand?” Perhaps the topic is made too easy? In an edited volume reviewers often comment on outstanding contributions, for example Chapter X is much better or worse than the rest of the book.

On the more practical front you can comment on ‘typos’ in the text, the relevance of picture on the front cover or the quality of the illustrations used. You can evaluate the book’s contents through the Table of Contents, e.g.: Are there any obvious sections/topics missing? Is the structure of the book logical, e.g.: Could the author have presented the information in a different order? Similarly, does the book have an Index? Having an Index is vital to text books and reference books. If there is an Index, is it of sufficient quality or does it have obvious omissions? On more than one occasion I have commented on the poor quality of the book’s Index, for example, “... the index, always very important in a textbook, is not complete, for example, ‘mixed methods’, ‘gate-keepers’ or ‘ethics’ are not indexed ([Van Teijlingen 2005](#)).

Remember the reader!

You should consider how useful your comments are to the reader in a different country as *Sociological Research Online* is an international journal. If possible make some comment about the wider appeal of the book. If the book focuses on a very precise/focused research topic, for example the social organisation of maternity care in the Netherlands, reflect how this topic might be of interest to researchers interested in health care systems in general or sociologists of the professions.

Bear in mind that one purpose of book reviews for many sociologists is to help them decide whether or not to order the book for their university library or whether or not to recommend it to their (research) students and academic colleagues. Hence make sure you say something about the book’s intended audience, students, postgraduate students, researchers. For example, address questions such as: “Is the book readable?”; “Does the book include a lot of jargon?”; “Has the author divided the book in clear distinct sections?” and/or “Is the book very theoretical or, indeed, applied?”

Also if you are aware of the wider literature on the topic, inform the readers how and why this book is different from the book most people already know in this academic field, for example, the one by Giddens or Bourdieu. *Sociological Research Online* does accept selected references in book reviews, if these references are closely related to the review and they help to put the book under review in perspective (e.g. [Torode 2006](#); [Wrede 2006](#)).

The role of book review editor

Your review is likely to receive further editing if your grammar or spelling is incorrect or your sentences are too long or too woolly, or some of the text offensive (to the reader or the author of the book), but also if you do not stick to the journal's instructions (especially regarding the word length). As *Sociological Research Online* is an online journal it does not have to worry to the same extent about the exact number of words or pages in a particular issue. So having a few extra words is not a problem, but the book review editor has the responsibility to keep the reviews attractive, enjoyable and clear for the average reader. The number of people who have come to me over the years with the excuse that the book they volunteered to review had xx chapters or xx contributors which made it impossible to stick to our suggested word limit, is fairly large. My reply is usually: "Be selective, you don't have to outline every single chapter or in an edited volume mention all contributions. Use your imagination and highlight the best and the worst chapters, or the most theoretical and the most applied contributions." And if that does work, I would often suggest: "You can have a few hundred more words, but I will edit some of it out."

Final thoughts

There is no best way of producing a good book review, but there are worse (bad) ways. You have probably gone too far if your review is about the topic covered in the book, rather than the book itself. *Sociological Research Online* happily accepts a range of slightly different styles and approaches to writing a book review. Occasionally I read a submitted review and think: "I would not have done it this way, but it works and it is entertaining and informative, so I'll accept it as it is."

Avoid writing a summary of the book rather than review or critique. There is a risk of the former if you really like to book. It is naturally easier to write a book review on a book you disagree with than one you totally agree with. Try to write what make you like the book, and perhaps list some of its weaknesses however minor these might be. As will all writing for publication once you have your final draft, make sure you get a colleague to read it and comment on it for you. Often other people see things in the text you cannot see as you have been too close to it. You may no longer see that you criticise a book for using jargon, whilst using some of it yourself. As with any other academic publication your book review will benefit from rewriting and rephrasing, as "there is no alternative to polishing and polishing" (**Albert 1996**: 2).

It is recognised that writing a book review is a good way of getting into print for the first time (**Williamson 2005**). Therefore, *Sociological Research Online* is keen to encourage social science postgraduate students and junior research assistants to write a review of a book closely related to their research topic. However, we are also very keen for more established authors/sociologists to review other people's work.

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