Editorial Foreword: What Use is an Editor?

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Volume 41(3) of Sociology may seem an odd place to break with the traditional format of editorial foreword, but such are the production schedules for the journal that we write this at the close of our first year editing the journal, and it seems timely to reflect on our experience thus far, and, to ruminate on the process of editing.

The editorial foreword has been a feature of Sociology since volume 39 and has to date provided a summary of the issue content and, ideally, some sense of the coherence of each issue around key sociological themes, aspects of methodology or substantive topics of interest. There are at least three problems with the current approach to the foreword. Firstly, they have focused solely on articles and ignored the other content of the journal – the review essays, and joint and single book reviews which make up the rest of the journal. These are an important resource for sociologists, and may well be the first (or possibly only) part of the journal that is read by some of our readership. They are often the place, rightly, for critical opinion, reflection and debate – all things which the journal wishes to encourage. Secondly, articles in the journal all have an abstract summarizing their content so the repetition of these details in the opening pages of each issue may be redundant and a waste of precious page allowances. Thirdly, there is the editorial task of articulating linkages between what are often very diverse pieces of work. The judgement of how far we succeed in this sense-making task ultimately lies with our readership and with the members of our Editorial Board who critically review each issue of the journal. However, the difficulty for us is in trying to balance this desire to make connections between articles, by grouping like with like and adding commentary in the foreword, with the need to ensure timely publication and adhere broadly to the principle of first come first served (such that papers accepted earlier get published sooner). In the light of these problems, and following discussion...
about the foreword at the Editorial Board we have decided to experiment with the content of the foreword, and what better place to start than with the question of editorial utility?

Miser, writing about editing the journal *Operations Research*, suggests that editors need ‘a broad conception of the science their journal treats’ (1998: 71), which includes understanding where the journal has come from, critically appraising strengths, weaknesses and important gaps that need to be filled, and having a ‘creative and imaginative view of the future prospects and opportunities for the field’. One year into editing we are beginning to appreciate the magnitude of this task for *Sociology*. The aims of *Sociology* are to publish outstanding and original articles which advance the theoretical understanding of, and promote empirical research about, the widest range of sociological topics. In practice this means that there is a place for both general and more specialist sociology, for both theory development and empirical analysis, and for quantitative and qualitative and mixed methodologies as evinced in the current issue. The issue includes articles reporting on the analysis of quantitative data (by Tamar Fischer and by Jeff Henderson and his colleagues, this latter article also being notable for contributing to the sociology of development, on which there has been relatively little in the journal in recent years) as well as articles reporting on the analysis of qualitative data, and articles that seek to engage with key theoretical debates in the discipline.

And just where are the boundaries of this science of sociology? We find frequently that we are asked to consider papers that can be located on the boundaries of our discipline and indeed *Sociology* has published articles that might be regarded as ‘belonging’ to psycho-social or cultural studies, to economics, philosophy or anthropology, or which focus on sub-disciplines or substantive topic areas such as work, employment, organizations, health or gender. One function of editors, then, is to demarcate the field – to say what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’. Max Weber, whose career included work as an editor of the *Archives for Social Science and Social Welfare*, referred in this context to the need for editors of a journal to have a ‘line’ (1949: 50), and he went on to discuss the benefits of conceiving a field broadly rather than narrowly. Just a few years before this Emile Durkheim’s editorial role with the journal *L’Année Sociologique* had led him to the same conclusion, that an unduly narrow conception of the discipline would be ‘too restricted and of little use’ (1980: 47). One important aspect of *Sociology* is that it is a journal of the British Sociological Association (BSA), so in identifying the line the editors need to be mindful of responsibilities to this professional association as well as to the discipline.

Another function of editors, described by Miser, is being ‘venturesome’. At *Sociology* this entails pursuing opportunities to enhance the position of the journal, for example by encouraging the use of online access to the journal and debating the merits and problems posed by institutional repositories. The editors’ membership of and contribution to the work of the BSA Publications Committee is vital in this respect.

It also means paying attention to trends and fashions in the discipline, what is new and what is innovative. Much of the work published in the journal in 2006
has had an ‘identity’ theme. This may reflect the interest generated about this topic by the special issue 39(5) on class, culture and identity that was co-edited by our predecessors (Stephanie Lawler and David Byrne), but one role for the editors, especially on a journal that aims to publish on a wide variety of topics, is to ensure that such a theme does not dominate to the exclusion of other aspects of contemporary sociology. One of our concerns in taking on the editorship was to reconsider the debates about methodological pluralism. There is a long-standing perception that quantitative material seldom gets published in Sociology. We endeavour to ensure that the journal is open to work using a variety of methods, but of course this is dependent on the submissions that we receive. We are pleased to note that there have been a range of methods reflected in the empirical work over the past year. In addition to these considerations, because the journal is a publication of the BSA, the editors must be mindful that Sociology reflect the interests of all of its readership. The newly launched BSA group for sociologists outside academia was a salutary reminder that not all Sociology readers are ensconced in or focused on higher education (see http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/OutsideAcademia for more information).

A more traditional use of editors lies, as the name suggests, in editing copy. Sometimes this role is confused with proofreading, which is simply correcting typographical errors and checking facts, but it can be a more hands-on role – crafting the structure and argument, or altering phrasing. Blake Morrison (2005), reflecting on the decline of the literary editor, recently quoted a description of editors as ‘straight-backed and terrifying, all integrity and no bullshit, responding to vocational calling and above all driven by a love of the word, brave enough not only to champion the best but also to tell their authors whatever might be needed to improve their work’. The task of championing the best and suggesting improvements is one that is shared between the editorial team and our dedicated and hardworking referees, but ultimately the decision making – and perhaps more importantly the task of conveying these decisions to authors – rests with the editors. Thus, one useful function of an editor is to provide the public face of these decisions – to borrow the American phrase, ‘the buck stops here’. How far the editors get involved in editing copy varies according to the quality of the submissions, although compared to some journals Sociology takes a fairly ‘light touch’ approach. The result, we hope, is a diversity of authorial voices that reflects the best of current sociology.

References