

## Editorial

# Continuity and Change at ESR: A Letter from the Editor

Dear reader,

As you are reading these lines, chances are that you are also involved in the operation of the *European Sociological Review* (ESR) in other roles, whether as one of our reviewers, one of our authors, as a past or present member of the ESR Editorial Board, or as someone who has supported the journal in some other capacity or context. Or maybe you are taking an interest because you may have developed a certain regard for research published in ESR that you were reading for your own training and research, and now aspire to join the ESR community of scholars in any of these various roles in the future. But whatever your background and current relation to ESR, I am grateful for your interest in and your support of the journal. Assuming the Editor-in-Chief position at ESR first and foremost is a humbling experience because it makes one realize the incredible amount of both expertise and goodwill on which the running of the journal is resting. ESR truly does represent an active community of sociologists, in part through the good research that we visibly publish, but in at least equal part also through the much less visible activities of reviewing, developing, and editing submissions up to the point of them becoming genuine ESR articles. So in one sense, this letter merely is a long way of saying ‘thank you’ to the many people who make ESR possible as creative authors, constructive reviewers, interested readers, and careful fellow editors.

The occasion to write this letter of thanks is of course provided by the transition at the ESR’s Editor-in-Chief position from Melinda Mills to myself. Following up on Melinda’s successful 6-year tenure at the helm of ESR, I am grateful to the Board of the European Consortium for Sociological Research as well as to Oxford University Press for now entrusting the journal to my care for the next couple of years. Over the years, ESR has developed into one of the major journals of the discipline, known for publishing innovative research that

seeks to contribute to a cumulative, analytical, and rigorous social science, and for serving an intellectual community of European social scientists and their allied colleagues elsewhere around the world. And thanks to Melinda’s creativity in re-organizing the journal’s operations during her term, I also firmly believe that ESR is now well equipped to meet the challenges of high-quality journal publishing, whether in terms of handling the substantial volume of submissions to the journal efficiently or in terms of soliciting insightful and constructive reviews on the manuscripts that we receive to single out and to further develop the most promising work for eventual publication.

## Continuity

Naturally, the fact that the ESR Editorship has now passed from Melinda Mills to myself and that the ESR Editorial Office has moved from Nuffield College to the University of Frankfurt should not imply any change in those qualities that we all have come to appreciate about ESR. The journal has always been and will continue to be a natural home for sociological research that combines analytical theory, stringent empirical analyses, and the epistemological goal of building a generalizing body of knowledge on the regularities of the social world. ESR surely has its traditional strengths in quantitative sociology, in social stratification and closely related fields, and in cross-nationally comparative research in particular, but these traditional strengths have never exhausted ESR’s publication profile nor the intellectual umbrella provided by the shared understanding of sociology as an analytical and cumulative population science so aptly delineated by John Goldthorpe (2016). Therefore, ESR always has and will continue to publish articles from all fields of sociological research, with many of them in fact also featuring analytical exchange across disciplinary boundaries, cutting-edge

methodologies, or deep reflections on proper research design—the increasing interest in experimental and quasi-experimental designs evident also in ESR is a case in point. And yet, all these typical features of articles published in the journal merely encircle the ultimate characteristic that we seek for in submissions, and that forms the one criterion of our editorial decisions: research quality. A convincing manuscript that makes a significant contribution on a research problem of broad sociological interest should be publishable in ESR. It is as simple, and at the same time as challenging, as that.

The challenging part obviously stems from the fact that ESR subjects all manuscripts to intense and double-blind peer review, whereby we hope to identify precisely those submissions that best fulfil our general conditions for publication, that report valid evidence on interesting sociological questions, and that therefore deserve to be published and widely read. In consequence, publishing ESR rests on two equally important foundations. The visible part are the many creative, thoughtful, and stringent pieces of research that we are grateful to receive as manuscript submissions and that eventually end up as published ESR articles. The other, much less visible part is the process of peer review, where literally a host of colleagues—from the various areas and fields of our discipline, but also from our neighbouring social sciences, and from all over Europe and indeed many other places—is willing to provide their time, efforts, and insight to read, consider, and carefully comment on the manuscripts submitted to the journal. Ever since I joined the ESR core editorial team in 2014, I have in fact been impressed with the incredible amount of goodwill that ESR receives from the research community, and with the readiness of our colleagues to take on our requests for manuscript reviews, even when we approach many of you several times a year. These days, ESR is handling well upwards of 300 manuscript reviews per year, and the sheer scale ensures that running the journal rests on and reflects the efforts of a large and international academic community.

But what is impressing me most of all about ESR is the quality of reviews that we and our authors constantly receive. In my tenure on the core ESR team, it has been a rare occasion to see a report that had not thoroughly considered a manuscript; that had not seriously engaged with the theoretical arguments, the research design, or the empirical evidence; or that had not sought in earnest to offer critical, but constructive suggestions for improvement. Sure enough, our authors will often feel that their manuscripts have received tough treatment by the ESR reviewers or the editors. ESR after all can only publish a small fraction of the submissions

that we receive, and we also do seek to uphold high standards of research quality. Yet I will also hold that, in the wide majority of cases, the reviews that we and our authors receive are remarkably free from pettiness and intellectual envy but testify to the readiness of our reviewers to seriously engage with the research that we ask them to judge and to welcome new contributions to our social science mission that pass the quality test. In fact, I consider the high standards of reviewing at the journal ESR's greatest asset. There are other journals that publish good work, but in my own view and experience, sociologists need to travel far and wide to receive the same quality of feedback on their work that ESR reviewers are consistently providing. And this is a true achievement of a whole academic community that the journal rests upon. You thus see me deeply grateful for the constant efforts of our many colleagues who act as reviewers, and who do so in such generous and thoughtful ways. Thank you so much. Without these efforts, ESR could not be the journal that it is.

All that said, I should also like to emphasize expressly that neither we as ESR editors nor I believe our reviewers wish to reduce ourselves to a mere sorting role. At ESR, we all take the developmental view of peer review. This means that we are putting a premium on thorough but constructive reviewing and on maintaining an intellectually serious exchange between reviewers, editors, and authors about the merits of a manuscript and about ways to increase both the validity of the research that is being presented as well as its good communication to a wider academic audience. The eventual result of the journal's peer-review process will be a binary decision no less about either accepting a submission for publication or not, but the commitment to developmental peer review adds another layer of complexity, time, and serious engagement with research that is being submitted to the journal. And, as ESR editors, we are fully and acutely aware that doing peer review also is about properly protecting authors' rights—to receive fair and constructive reviewing of their manuscripts, to receive fair and transparent publication decisions, and to avoid undue delays in the review and publication process. It is on others to judge the journal on its success on the first two goals, but as regards manuscript turnover and speed of publication, I am happy to say that I think that ESR is fully achieving its goals. At this point, our authors can count on receiving a first decision on their submission within 3–4 months at the very latest, and I also think that this is about what both authors and we as editors should allow for having a quality peer-review process. Also, accepted manuscripts enjoy fast advance access publication through the ESR website, usually

within less than 4 weeks of acceptance, and, thanks to ESR currently no longer having an extensive backlog, publication in print usually follows suit one or two print issues later. In addition ESR is running a modest, but I hope reasonable and useful Web and social media presence through its website and Twitter channel to spread the news on the latest published work even further.

Given the scale that ESR has been assuming over time, the successful operation of the journal rests on many shoulders, and this remark involves quite a few important people even besides our many good reviewers. In fact, I believe that it has been one of the most important and probably one of the best and wisest decision in the journal's lifetime when, a few years ago during her tenure as the ESR editor, Melinda Mills decided to make the ESR editorship a communal effort by creating the positions of several Associate Editors and by establishing a Deputy Editor position to help handle all practical matters of the journal's operation. Besides having the obvious effect of distributing the work on several shoulders, a second eminently important implication has been to ensure that the ESR editorship now rests on broader academic foundations than ever, as each Associate Editor brings his or her particular expertise and scholarly networks into the service of the journal and, last but not least, also helps to ensure that the journal's editorial team properly reflects the fact that ESR is meant to represent, publish, and showcase the efforts of, at least, a truly European research community. Taking over as the new Editor-in-Chief, I am deeply grateful to Melinda for her thoughtfulness and her determined implementation of an excellent structure that will serve the journal well for many years to come. And I should add explicitly that my gratefulness extends to the wonderful colleagues—Irena Kogan, Paolo Barbieri, Christiaan Monden, Mads Meier Jæger, and Jason Beckfield as Associate Editors, and Patrick Präg as ESR's invaluable Deputy Editor—who were serving successfully in these new roles in the past few years, and who have in fact developed into spectacular role models now to be followed by the new members of ESR's editorial team. Likewise, I am deeply thankful to Merike Dermody for her many years of service as ESR's Associate Editor for Production. And in all this, I should also very much like to include the wonderful team that supports ESR at Oxford University Press so generously and effectively—and that is likely to be the least visible part of running ESR. So this is an excellent moment not simply of thanking Oxford University Press (OUP) for being such a good partner for the journal in the abstract, but very expressly to say a huge thank you to Vanessa Lacey as ESR's wonderful publisher at OUP, Pratima Mathews,

Alice James, and now Laura Carter as ESR's production editors, Panjabakesan Thanavel and his team as the journal's copy-editors, and Simone Larche as OUP's manager of the ScholarOne submission system. In a very deep sense, ESR would not be possible without you—and I therefore would like to thank you for your good work with all my heart, and I am looking forward very much to working on ESR together with all of you.

## Change

Thanks to Melinda's and everyone else's consistent good work and effort, I believe it is entirely fair to say that ESR is in splendid shape at this point. The journal is far from being short of good manuscript submissions, we are happy to be publishing many interesting pieces of research, for which our authors and also the journal are receiving academic credit and recognition, and the operation of the journal is both efficient and resting on solid and broad academic foundations. Nevertheless, a transition in the leadership of ESR, or indeed any academic journal, inevitably also involves change.

Some of this change involves people who critically contribute to the present and hopefully continued success of the journal. First and foremost, you will not be surprised to hear that I am deeply grateful to my colleagues Irena Kogan, Paolo Barbieri, and Christiaan Monden, who have all kindly and generously agreed to extend their tenure as Associate Editors, which brings another very welcome measure of experience and continuity to the operation of ESR, while the editorship is transitioning from Melinda Mills to myself. The four of us are now being joined by Marie Evertsson and Dániel Horn, who both took up their appointments as new Associate Editors of ESR in January already, and by Christine Schwartz, who will follow suit in March. As we other members of the ESR team had seen Marie, Christine, and Dániel as the ideal colleagues to become new Associate Editors for the journal, we consider ourselves very fortunate indeed that they are now bringing their expertise and good judgement to the service of ESR. Together, we now look forward to be working on keeping ESR the premier research platform that it currently is. A second important element behind our optimism is that we know to have two wonderful new Deputy Editors in Jan Brülle, who has been acting as Deputy Editor since October, and in Eleonora Vlach, who will take over in February when Jan will be taking a few months of parental leave. Together with Eleonora and Jan, the new ESR core team should and will be well equipped to run the journal smoothly and in an intellectually rigorous and stimulating way.

The people behind ESR are not the only thing that is changing about the journal, however. As one of the most visible changes, I have lifted the strict limit of 7,000 words for ESR manuscripts, and instead the journal is now returning to its traditional model of aiming to publish contributions that are about 8,000 words plus figures and tables (or around 10,000 words in total). Plus, the new ESR word limit is explicitly intended as a guideline to our authors, not as a fixed restriction to be blindly administered on any and all submissions to the journal. In our editorial experience, the traditional ESR article length often indeed is a good format to communicate research findings—in suitable depth and extension, while not losing focus and stringency. But we also know from experience that expectations about quality articles, especially for empirical contributions, have generally been growing rather than falling, as expressed e.g. in ever greater demands on our authors to document the validity of their conclusions through robustness checks, alternative operationalizations, and other sensitivity checks, but likewise in higher demands in terms of theoretical consistency, methodological stringency, and authors' demonstrated command of the received literature. With all that, and also with sociological research—or at least the ESR type of sociology conducted as a cumulative social science—becoming ever more sophisticated, cutting-edge work at the theoretical or empirical frontiers of the discipline is increasingly unlikely to fit a stereotypical 7,000 or even 8,000 words limit. And the flagship journal that ESR is, we should acknowledge and allow, if not even encourage, this development if our aim is to publish the best sociological research. In consequence, we will deliberately administer even the new 8,000 words limit as a 'breathing-space' policy: if your article is contributing important theoretical, methodological, or empirical innovations to the science of sociology, then ESR should be willing to publish it. That is, if quality justifies and requires it (and if you are able to convince the ESR reviewers and editors of this), ESR will now be willing to review and publish manuscripts that exceed its traditional 8,000/10,000 words limit, and we are looking forward to seeing how you, as our authors, will be responding to this new policy. As the main criterion for an ESR publication is and should be quality, the length and format of a contribution are—within the natural limits of a print journal publication, of course—of secondary concern. Admittedly, we are also being helped in acting on our academic convictions by the simple fact that OUP has generously increased ESR's annual page budget since 2017.

The second visible change to the journal content will be that we have decided to drop the book review section

from the journal. While I want to be expressly clear about my sincere gratitude to Louis-André Vallet and Silke Schneider, who served as ESR's competent and intellectually inquisitive Book Review Editors for several years, we all felt that the book review section is probably not the main reason why our readers are turning to ESR. Yet to keep a 'service' element on the journal, we will substitute a new article format, tentatively labelled a Data Briefs section, as a hopefully regular part of ESR. Our idea behind it, originally another long-time idea of Melinda Mills in fact, is to create a publication space for data producers and data providers to inform the ESR community about interesting and relevant data sources for sociological research. These Data Briefs should discuss and showcase the sociological potential of the data, but also describe and discuss the study's research design, sampling, or questionnaire content; likewise, we can and will have Data Briefs on both old and new data sources, where new studies can be brought to the attention of quantitative sociologists or new developments be described for established data sources. Importantly, the Data Briefs will be standard article length publications that can subsequently serve as key references to a data source and thereby not the least confer a deserved academic recognition to the producers and providers of social science data. At present, we envisage to begin having one Data Brief per issue or at least in every other issue in the second half of 2018, and we are in the process of issuing our first invitations to the producers of interesting data. And if you should have ideas and suggestions about studies and data sources to include as Data Briefs in some future ESR issue, notably about any lesser known studies that deserve sociological attention, then please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Editorial Office.

### The Years Ahead for ESR

Personally, I am excited about these new developments in the journal's profile and about how we all will be making good use of them in the next years. I also hope that the new features of ESR may also meet with your interest in, goodwill for, and continued support of the journal's success. Clearly, the changes that we have already implemented are unlikely to exhaust the list of challenges ahead of ESR in particular, or academic journal publishing in the social sciences more generally.

As regards ESR specifically, we as editors will surely be observant as to whether the policy changes that we just implemented are having the desired impacts on maintaining and further developing the journal's quality and usefulness. Also, I consider it a relevant and

persistent concern of any ESR editor to work towards ever broadening the journal's author and reviewer base by attracting the best sociology in or on Europe to the journal, to ensure that the journal represents a true and joint European effort in all of its dimensions, and last but not least to support and spread the mission of the ECSR in promoting the case of an empirical and analytical sociology that revolves around the formulation of testable analytical hypotheses, the stringent empirical testing of these, and the contributions to a cumulative body of knowledge that results from such efforts. Right in 2018, we will surely be facing occasions for implementing these principles on a more practical level, e.g. when reconfiguring and bringing new members to the ESR Editorial Board over the next few months, or when seeking to potentially add one more Associate Editor to the core ESR team to cope with the increasing number and also the increasing thematic breadth of manuscript submissions to the journal.

And then there are the many other larger trends that affect academic journal publishing, peer reviewing, or even the conduct of science at large. Clearly, ESR needs to be aware of and respond to new technical developments by, e.g., providing reasonable options for open-access publications, by maintaining a useful Web and media presence besides the print and online publication. Next to maintaining its high quality of peer reviewing, the journal surely also needs to respond to issues of research reproducibility by developing its own transparency policies and explicit guidelines for [supplementary materials](#) and for the documentation of data, programs, or protocols required to replicate the findings reported in ESR articles. And, in the very grand scheme of things, running an academic journal these days also means to stand in for open and critical, but at the same time also constructive, informed, and professional discussions about the available evidence on—in ESR's case—the empirical structure of the social world and its generative mechanisms, and equally open-minded debates about adequate theoretical foundations to make sense of our real-world observations. Evidently, neither ESR nor any other academic journal or publication will be able to make and defend the case for intellectual freedom single-handedly. But what a journal like ESR can, besides being a quality-tested communication channel between researchers, and what it did for myself a long time ago is to document the power of science, the value of rigorous analytical thinking, of asking relevant questions, and the pay-off to equally stringent empirical

analysis—and thereby invite the next generation of our students to see this and to join the effort of developing an analytical understanding of the social world. In my own case, it actually was Blossfeld's (1986) well-known article 'Career Opportunities in the Federal Republic of Germany' which pioneered the longitudinal study of careers in Europe, which served as my exposure to cutting-edge quantitative sociology when I had to present it in a graduate-level seminar on the sociology of the life course with Walter Müller in Mannheim, and which, yes, indeed, had been published in the second volume of ESR—so thank you Walter for that seminar, and thank you Peter for that article.

And having read this far, I think and hope that you will have taken from this letter that I am assuming the ESR editor's position with a deep sense of stewardship, and in equally deep respect for the work of Karl-Ulrich Mayer, Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Harry Ganzeboom, and Melinda Mills, my predecessors in this role who made ESR the flagship journal that it is today. Against the weight of this history, I sincerely hope that, together with my fellow editors Paolo Barbieri, Marie Evertsson, Dániel Horn, Irena Kogan, Christiaan Monden, and Christine Schwartz, we will be able to serve the ESR community well in the coming years, and I truly look forward to working with you all to continue bringing the best sociological research from Europe, on Europe or speaking to a true European community of scholars to ESR. And if you should have any thoughts, comments, or suggestions to share for making ESR an even better academic journal, then please start a conversation with us.

I thank you all for your continued goodwill towards the journal. For the time being, I hope that the current issue may yet again contain a few of those pieces of research that you expect to see in ESR, and that will successfully inform your own and others' research in years to come. Enjoy your read!

Your editor,  
Markus Gangl, on behalf of all the ESR editors

## References

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