



Playing to Your Strengths:

Understanding How Culture Can Strengthen a
Scientific Grant Proposal

Jack R. Friedman, Ph.D.

University of Oklahoma
Center for Applied Social
Research

Priorities, Priorities!

- No matter how you approach a proposal, the SCIENCE COMES FIRST!!!
 - If the scientific relevance, methods, etc. isn't bullet-proof, the rest won't matter
- If the science is strong, you need to consider what will DISTINGUISH your proposal from other strong proposals



Who is your audience?

- Mostly “scientists” – both social scientists and natural/physical scientists
- Who are those scientists?
 - They want to see things that LOOK like the scientific questions that they are used to
 - HOWEVER, they are also BORED having to read too many applications, most of which look the same (or are similar), most of which are VERY technical
 - They are SKEPTICAL about unconvincing arguments about social/cultural importance of environmental/ecological proposals because most proposals are not REALLY built around an interest in the social needs/consequences of the research ...



Who is your audience? (cont.)



- Who are those scientists?
 - Most are liberal (politically and culturally) so THEY ARE PREDISPOSED TO BEING SYMPATHETIC TOWARD PEOPLE IN NEED AND PEOPLE WHO HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN REPRESSED!
 - However, their first concern is always about whether or not the SCIENCE is good
 - Regardless ... they are craving the combination of GOOD SCIENCE and a GOOD STORY!

What can you do?

- Be as SPECIFIC as you can about why some research proposal will help you and your tribe
 - What this means is that you should think about the impacts in a way that makes your context look DIFFERENT than other folks
 - EVERYBODY is at risk from, for instance, climate change
 - EVERYBODY should worry about food security, resilience in the face of severe weather, degradation of water infrastructure and water quality, of the loss of species and natural ecosystems
- What STORY can you tell that makes YOUR situation compelling to the audience who will be reading your proposal?
- SPECIFICS, SPECIFICS, SPECIFICS!!!



Specifics?



- If you are going to talk about “food security” ...
 - Talk about the SPECIFICS of the situation – what food do you rely on, who relies on it, why are other options not ideal or reasonable or acceptable
 - This might involve doing some research to get some numbers BEFORE you apply for a grant so that you can support your argument

- If you are going to talk about the loss of tribally-important ecosystems ...
 - Talk about the SPECIFICS of the situation – what plants, animals, and/or features of the landscape (rivers, hills, forests, etc.) are being threatened and WHY they have special importance
 - Before you object ... this DOES NOT mean revealing special, secret, or privileged tribal knowledge, but, it DOES mean that you will need to be clever about how you can get the importance across without simply being vague
 - Saying that the loss of a river would make it impossible for your people to collect pebbles from that river that are necessary for making ritually- and spiritually-important rattles won't make sense to many people (why not just go pick the pebbles from the dry river bed) unless you also explain that it is the flowing spirit of the water that imbues the pebbles with their spiritual power ...

Storytelling and the Scientist



- Most scientists who are writing a grant proposal wish that they had a good story to tell about how SPECIFIC people are being impacted by (or, are impacting) the environment
- The telling of a story usually cuts through the tedious and dry scientific language, providing the reviewer of a proposal a moment where they can really and truly imagine the consequences and impacts of a grant on people
- TELLING STORIES FILLED WITH SPECIFICS can distinguish your proposal from others!

Thanks!

- Questions?

Jack R. Friedman, Ph.D.

Center for Applied Social Research

University of Oklahoma

jack.r.friedman@ou.edu

