Grant writing in ethics & social science
Lessons, Pitfalls, Advice

Maureen Kelley, Patricia Kingori, Dorcas Kamuya, Mike Parker

The Global Health Bioethics Network

www.e-mops.ning.com

Overview

Getting Started:

- Coming up with research ideas, funding sources, planning, building a team

Writing the grant*:*

- First drafts, feedback, what makes a good grant

Surviving the review Process:

- Reviewers, revisions

The interview:

- How to prepare, what to expect

After the decision:

- Coping with rejection, after funding – what's next

Questions & shared experiences from the group

Getting started

- **How do you come up with a grant idea?**
  - Gap analysis
    - Literature review and/or prior research reveals important gaps in what we know
  - Pilot or prelim data
    - Interesting questions that emerged from your prior data or experiences in the field
  - Expert workshop
  - Questions raised by a linked clinical or socio-behavioural study
    - e.g. new tech raises new social/ethical questions
  - Responding to a specific funding call
  - Vivid dream
    - See Benzene

Getting started

- **Types of research questions in Social Science & Ethics**
  - Ethical considerations in 'X'
    - e.g., machine learning in global health
  - Investigating an ethical idea more deeply
    - e.g., vulnerability, equity, right to health
  - Confirming or challenging suggestive data on a problem
    -e.g., acceptability of broad consent to research
  - Exploring novel approaches to familiar problems
    - e.g., designing and evaluating cartoons for use in HIV disclosure to children
  - Rethinking familiar ethical paradigms
    - e.g., the recent work challenging the idea that pregnant women are a vulnerable population.
  - Identifying ethical, social, cultural barriers/facilitators to implementation of interventions
    - e.g., cultural attitudes toward minimally invasive tissue sampling over autopsy
  - Studying patient/public perceptions about an ethical issue/intervention
    - e.g., young people's views on the ethics of research

The Global Health Bioethics Network is funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (096527)

Getting started

- **How do you identify a funding source?**
  - Addressing a funder's call on a specific area
  - Submitting a research idea to a general call
  - Read the funder's priorities or specific call very carefully, BEFORE you start working on the grant. Fit is critical.

- **Methodology** **Research Question**
  - Methods should be adequate to answering your research question(s)

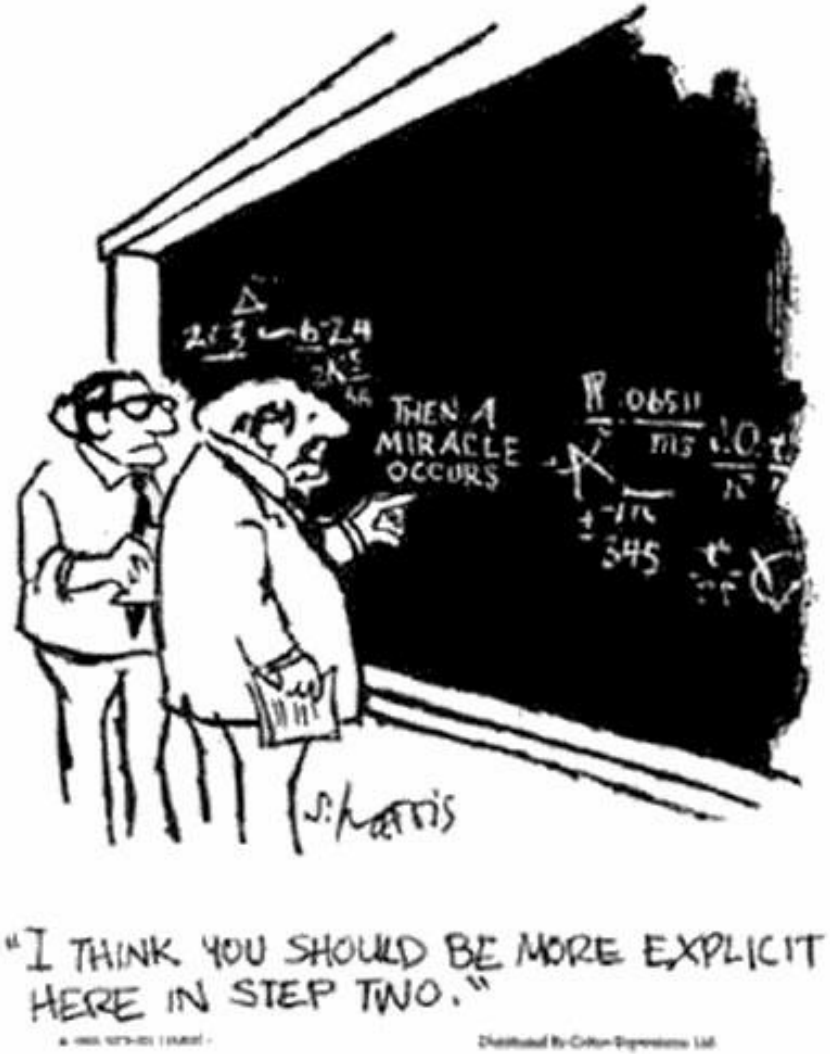
Practical steps in planning a submission

- ✓ **Create a timeline to submission**
  - ✓ Funder's deadline
  - ✓ Your institutional deadlines: grants office, budget, approvals
  - ✓ Your team's deadlines – circulating for input from collaborators, colleagues, supervisors
  - ✓ Letters of support, advisory boards
  - ✓ Other institutions involved? What are their deadlines?
- ✓ **Allow time to build teams**
- ✓ **Early, informal community engagement to assess feasibility/need/interest and to gather helpful insights**
- ✓ **Budget planning**
- ✓ **Be mindful of giving collaborators, supervisors and others time to write letters or contribute to grant**

The Global Health Bioethics Network is funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (096527)

Writing the grant

- **Typical proposal structure: Why? What? Where? Who? When?**
  - **Abstract** – succinct summary of project
  - **Background** – Why is this important? Literature and justification for research
  - **Research questions or aims** – What questions will you answer?
  - **Methods/approach** – What will you do? How will you answer your research questions
  - **Timeline** – what happens when, milestones, outputs
  - **Team structure** – who is on the team, expertise, why are you the right people?
  - **Budget and justification**– costing to carry out the work and why necessary
  - **Tools or instruments** – appendices with draft tools



The Global Health Bioethics Network is funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (096527)

Writing the grant

What makes a strong proposal?

- Strong idea: high impact, novel, important, interesting
- Clear rationale for the research
- Clear plan: reviewers should be able to imagine what you will be doing
- Methods adequate to answering research questions
- Right person or team for the job
- Institutional support
- Feasibility: sufficient time and resources to answer the questions; right partners and support; recruitment aims are reasonable; no glaring ethical concerns or ethical concerns anticipated and planned for.

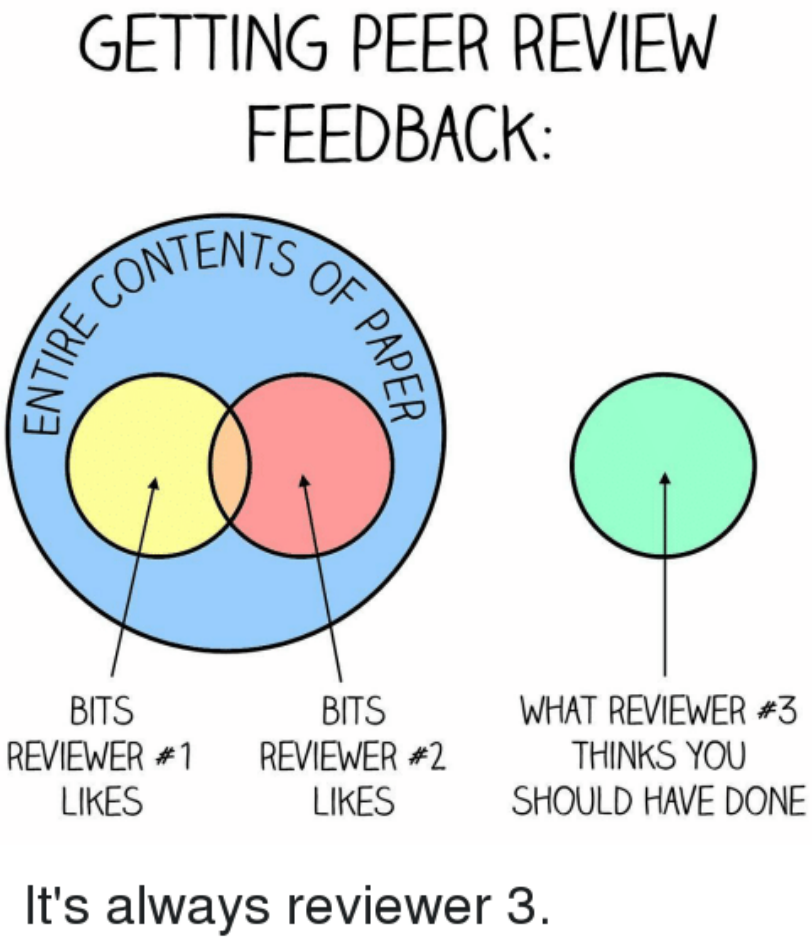
Writing the grant

Other characteristics of a strong proposal:

- It is clearly written
- Written for reviewers who might not be experts in your area: no jargon, acronyms spelled out initially and not excessive, definitions for key concepts
- Use headers and first sentences to guide reviewers through your proposal
- Engaging language and some enthusiasm – convey the importance of the work
- Avoid hyperbole – don't describe as "innovative" unless it *really* is innovative.
- Figures and diagrams: workflow, team structure, conceptual framework, timeline
- Look at strong examples:
  - Some funders post sample grants on their websites
  - Ask supervisors or senior colleagues if they will share proposals.

Navigating the review process

- Who will my reviewers be?
  - Experts in the field
  - Sometimes announced on funder website or told in advance, sometimes not
  - Outside reviewers often pulled from your citations
  - Don't forget to do a thorough background review and include key people in the field
- What do reviewers look for?
  - See previous criteria for strong proposal!
- Anticipating questions
  - What are the limitations of your approach or research questions?
  - Most criticisms are fair and track genuine concerns or limitations – acknowledge these and try to anticipate.



The Global Health Bioethics Network is funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (096527)

The interview: How to prepare

- How to prepare for an interview?
  - Know your proposal inside and out.
  - Know the field/ literature and where your proposed research fits within this.
  - Think through and write down possible questions ar your answers – especially re limitations.
  - Identify 2-3 key messages to convey.
  - Practice, practice, practice!
    - Schedule a mock interview with colleagues.
    - Practice in front of your partner and/or cat/dog/hamster
  - Look professional but be comfortable – not the day to try a new suit or shoes.
  - Follow your normal routine, GET sleep, allow time to get there, bring water.

During the interview

- What are some strategies for interviewing?
  - BREATHE
  - LISTEN to the questions. If you don't understand what is being asked, ask for clarification.
  - Don't be defensive – have confidence in your idea and calmly speak to criticisms/concerns.
  - Don't show annoyance if one person keeps harping on the same concern – do your best to answer but stand by your approach.
  - Acknowledge constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.
  - Show some enthusiasm for the idea! (without being weird and manic)
  - Remember your 2-3 key messages – if things get off track, try to come back to these and end on one of these.
  - Begin and end by thanking the panel

The Global Health Bioethics Network is funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (096527)

What to do if a grant is not funded

Stages of Grief:

Denial: Binge watch Netflix and eat pizza

Disappointment: Complain to your partner, dog, tolerant friend

Anger: "Reviewer #2!#$$%@!" Go to boxing class or martial arts

Sadness: It's only a grant, don't let it get you down.

Acceptance:

- Sit down with supervisors/colleagues to discuss reviewer comments
- Realize reviewers maybe had a point…

Restored faith in universe:

- Realize: many excellent projects are built on prior rejected grants that have been revised and improved.
- Revise and resubmit for another round or another funder.
- Or, try a different idea and put this on the shelf for later. Sometimes the timing is not right.

What to do if a grant is not funded

- Develop a thick skin – try not to take it personally!
- Reasons grants are not funded
  - Proposal did not meet all criteria for a good proposal discussed above – needs work.
    - Significant question//poor methodology
    - Excellent methods/research questions not novel
    - Issues around feasibility, support, team, cost
  - The proposal was good but the interview did not go well.
  - The competition was just very, very high.
  - Did not fit funder's priority areas
  - Funder divided on priority areas, or priority areas have changed
  - Funding pulled or cut (more common in gov grants)
  - The planets were not aligned (sometimes we just never know….)

Congratulations!
You got the grant, now what?

- **Go out for beers, eat cake!**
- Don’t wait for the funds to get started on activities not requiring ethics approval.
- Have job adverts ready.
- Meet with finance team.
- Develop interview tools, instruments.
- Ethics application.
- Conversations with key stakeholders around recruitment and planning.
- Other preparatory activities.
- Timeline is often tight and it helps to be ready to hit the ground running.

Questions & discussion