

June 20, 2014

An open letter to my scientific colleagues...

Dear colleagues:

Having failed to find a publisher for the following statement I am revising it for my website, www.andersonlab.com, where it will be available for all readers.

I have long been astonished at the cynical disrespect shown by fellow faculty toward peer review of applications for research grants. Especially disturbing are attempts to influence both the composition of the study section and the attitude of the reviewers. Indeed, strategies for manipulating study section scores are actively refined by experienced investigators and are blatantly promulgated in grant-getting seminars and workshops. My attempts at open discussion of the ethics of such behavior are met with either denial or indifference and almost never with a concern for the fundamental ethical principles that are involved. I have thus given up trying to discuss these issues in an open forum.

However, my basic concern remains active. In an attempt to influence the behavior of my colleagues I have considered the possibility that a (darkly) humorous statement may be a more effective way of getting my point across to my audience; i.e., a satirical essay may be more provocative than a sermon. Thus, I have composed a short (<400 word) piece that lists a series of specific strategies for manipulating one's study section. It starts with two strategies that are commonly used at my academic medical center and proceeds incrementally to the ludicrous.

My design anticipates that upon reading the final and outrageous strategy the reader would instantly realize that all prior strategies are as well unacceptable, including the first two that, as I say, are in common use at my institution and, I would infer, are widely accepted throughout our scientific community.

Having failed to publish this piece in the medical archives, I put it on my website hoping to achieve as wide an impact as possible. I would be especially pleased to be able to sharpen the ethical sensitivities of my fellow scientists.

Sincerely yours,

Clark Anderson

SatiricPieceAndLetterForWebSite.l64

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You will get your grant: A modest proposal*
(Version 4, June 20, 2014; <400 words)

As a senior professor with a 40-year record of continuous NIH funding, I am often asked how to deal with the critical reviewer on one's study section who seems always to have nothing good to say about one's application. What can be done to neutralize him? I offer a few strategies, beginning with the simplest and moving progressively to the more complex and intrusive.

1. Host your reviewer for a seminar visit. Treat him as a celebrity; fawn over his work. Impress him with your lab, facilities, and ideas. Arrange visits only with your most distinguished colleagues and trainees. Have the university president introduce his seminar. If he has a beard, comment favorably. Upon leaving he should be convinced that your work deserves the highest marks for novelty, significance, and approach. He will be on your side when he judges the merit of your application. You will get your grant. If this strategy fails, move on to #2.

2. Enlist your reviewer as a collaborator. Suggest a joint project, complementing your different approaches. If your application is a programmatic effort, name him to your list of outside reviewers. As your collaborator or consultant he will be obliged to remove himself from judging your grant application. You will get your grant. Should this strategy fail, move to #3.

3. Offer a bribe. In your name give a large donation to his department chair to honor your nemesis for his contributions to science and humanity. He will get the idea. You will get your grant. If this strategy fails, consider #4.

4. Block his participation in the study section meeting. For example, on the morning he is due to fly to D.C. for the study section meeting, call his secretary and tell her that his 8 year-old daughter has just gone missing from her summer camp in the Poconos. In the commotion he will miss his plane and will be unable to weigh in on your application. You will get your grant. If still desperate, move to #5.

5. ...a somewhat more invasive variant of #4. Arrange for his plane to be hijacked to Miami. He will miss the meeting and you will get your grant. As a last resort, consider #6.

6. Hire a hit man. Your reviewer will miss the meeting and you will get your grant.

*With apologies to Jonathan Swift, <http://art-bin.com/art/omodest.html>

Neutralizing_your_Critics.v4.l64.docx

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June 20, 2014. Afterthoughts as I arrange to put my satiric piece on my website:

While it has been more than three years since I first wrote the satiric piece and began to show it to my colleagues, I retreated from my concern once it became apparent that the piece would not be published. But, I remain perplexed by the response it received. So, let me at least record that response with the thought that perhaps the response is germane to the central issue.

First, as I said earlier, the editors of a half-dozen journals were not interested in publishing the piece nor did they comment on its substance. This list of journals included about an equal number of general medical journals and journals specializing in ethical matters. I am in the dark as to their objections.

Sending the piece off to literature professors at my own institution I asked for and expected to receive from them candid comments on both the substance and style of my piece. None of the three, two of whom were said to have a special interest in satire, acknowledged receipt of my letter. The one non-satire person, who I knew, I eventually telephoned and learned that other pressing concerns had taken precedence over reading my piece. I have no idea what

the three thought. Why would not a university colleague at least read a <400 word piece? Or if they read it, why would they not render a comment?

Sharing it with, and then interviewing, my medical and research colleagues I found that while their responses were various they all seemed to fail to understand the meaning of the statement. Some thought it was funny but void of meaning. Another asked me what response I expected from my readers. Others seemed not to see the elements of the continuum as a continuum; they rejected the basic premise. No one reacted as I had planned. For a variety of reasons, the piece did not make sense to them.

Pushing further, I found that the majority approved and in fact practiced the first two strategies outlined in the piece; i.e., they both invited reviewers to come visit and incorporated them as collaborators in their research efforts. I must conclude that their complicity, then, prevented them from understanding the point of the piece. They knew what it meant, but they could not incriminate themselves. One individual frankly explained to me that while activities attempting to influence reviewers may in the ideal world be unethical, such practice is common and necessary for successful competition for funding. Everybody does it, they told me.

One of my deans with whom I shared the piece wrote back that he disapproved of a faculty member suggesting assassination. I can only conclude that he too did not understand the point, despite my introductory explanation.

I conclude that my colleagues reject my ethical argument no matter how I present it, either as a rational explanation or as a satiric piece. Would there be a more effective way of presenting it?