To: Berkeley Sociology First Year Cohort
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Subject: Processual and Postural NSF Advice

Congratulations on your admission to Berkeley sociology! This document outlines some advice for applying to the NSF graduate research fellowship. Specifically, it provides some unvarnished tips on what, in my opinion, makes a good application. Rather than focus on the specific content (i.e., "have these three sections"), it instead concentrates on the work–process and professional orientation that seem to produce a good application. Because of this process–oriented posture, I hope that my advice will help you for applications beyond the NSF as well.

Disclaimer: I was lucky enough to receive one, but there is no guarantee that I know what the hell I'm talking about.

An emotional preamble, or a moment for us

You are already at Berkeley, so you're clearly an exceptionally accomplished, bright, amazing person who is unbelievably unique and deserves to have your work recognized. Great. But now you're about to participate in a crapshoot. You're in rarefied air in which *all* off the candidates who are in serious contention for the fellowships have exactly the same measurables as you.

This simple, emotionally brutal fact has two consequences. The first is that you might put together the Best Fellowship Application Ever and not receive anything (or get the dreaded "honorable mention").[1] Your reader might have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning, or maybe they don't like your proposal to study human-pet interaction because their dog died yesterday. You can't control that, and sometimes your luck runs out. Live with it, but understand that it says nothing about you, or the quality of your work.

Who does or doesn't get a fellowship is stochastic, but that doesn't mean all the effort you're putting in is pointless. You *can* weight the dice, and that what the game of polishing your application is fundamentally about. You want that exhausted, bored reviewer to sit up a little straighter when they get to your application because the writing pops off the page, and because they remember your research question five minutes later. In other words, when everyone represents virtually the same level of excellence, seemingly trivial things make a huge difference.

To sum up: if you don't get an NSF, it doesn't mean you're a bad scholar, just unlucky in this case; and if you do get one, it's because you're both good AND lucky.

[1] An "honorable mention" means that the NSF likes your application enough that they really, truly would like to give you money. But they won't.

NSF stands for Not So Fun

There are two key things you need to understand about the NSF (or, for that matter, any of the major fellowships you're applying for): (1) they are capacity-building fellowships, and (2) they are read by interested nonspecialists. Both of these points have important consequences.

Building capacity, or how to look smart

The NSF is geared around finding the "smartest" people in Sociology and awarding them long-term fellowships so they can concentrate on the brilliant research projects they propose. If you're one of those people, congratulations, you can stop reading and just get to work on your application. Okay, now that those jerks have stopped reading, we can get real. "Smartest" is in quotations for a reason. The NSF is about *looking* like you're one of those people and convincing the NSF that you can *propose* a *brilliant sounding* research project.

So here's the first thing to realize: *the NSF never checks to see if you executed your research project!* That's right. There is never a review, and they have never rescinded a fellowship because the found out that you're doing something different than you proposed. They're content to get a paragraph from you each year telling them, essentially, that you're still alive and "thank you for the money, government!"

This consequence of this fact is that your application is an opportunity to dream up a project that is the best combination of ambitious–yet–apparently–doable that you can possibly come up with. You will *not* be held to executing the details. The details, of course, are still very important, but for a different reason: they signal your ability to develop a convincing, empirically grounded research project that still represents a fundamental contribution to the "basic science" of sociology.

In sum, the NSF is about looking smart, not feeling or being smart. So how do you do that?

Nonspecialists read your stuff, so relax

Part of looking smart is understanding your audience and their expectations. The NSF area committees are composed of sociologists and allied social scientists, but generally (unless you're really unlucky) not subspecialists in your proposed research area. This means you can relax, and not worry about reading every single thing that's been written on (for example) race in America before you apply. Instead, focus on something different.

Imagine you are a harried senior professor who has been roped into being an NSF referee. It has been 30 years since you've taken your qualifying exams, and you are tired that particular day because you're on a new diet and can't eat bagels any more. You pick up the 27th proposal of the evening and are thinking to yourself "okay, three more and then finally I can watch *Jersey Shore* before bed. What's wrong with JWOWW anyway?" The proposal is on an area that you're vaguely familiar with,

but that's okay. You know how to identify a good sociological question, and you're more–or–less familiar with the methods the person is proposing.

If you're that professor, what will look smart? Obviously to even get your foot in the door you, the humble applicant, need to know some of the basic sub–disciplinary materials relevant to your work.[2] But there are two other key things that will get you on the good side of that senior professor. (1) You should make sure that your proposal is at least in dialog with a question that professor understands, and (2) your proposal should have a logical flow.

What are the questions your referees with understand? Sociology's a peculiar discipline in that its empirical domains are quite variegated, but each is informed by a similar set of structuring analytic problems.[3] Most of these are derived from the dead–white–men classics, but most are also the "big questions" that are obvious if you think about them for a second. These are questions like "How do people experience the constraint of social structure?" or "What are the key mechanisms of identity formation?" and they are simply timeless.[4]

The fact that they're timeless is a good thing for you, because it means your lazy reviewer understands them. This also means that you have ready–made questions that pull double duty: they (1) are a cheap way to make you look smart; and (2) are an easy way to establish a dialog with your interested nonspecialist reviewer. So,

> *Begin your application with a classic, "big" question of sociological theory/sociology as a whole, then link it to your specific research question.*

But don't be stupid about it. It's not enough to simply say "how do people experience the constraints of structure" and then follow it with "my ethnography of childhood development obviously addresses this..." Remember that your reviewer is going to be *bored and tired* and every unit of energy that you make them spend mentally putting the pieces of your project together is another excuse for them to put it down and forget about it.

Instead of being boring, obtuse, or trivial, you want your reviewer to experience your logical flow like a slip–n–slide. You want them to start at the top—your big intellectual question—to gain speed inevitably through the middle—your specific question—and be swept right through the end—your methodology and data. At every stage, your writing and logic should be so clear that the next step seems inevitable and obvious, but never tedious and boring. If you manage this, you will score points simply because your reviewer will remember application #27 because it was *the really well-written and logical one.* Thus,

> *Write your application clearly and logically for a tired reviewer. Make it easy for them to understand but not boring.*

[2] i.e., don't try to propose a project in the sociology of religion without mentioning, say, Durkheim.

[3] See Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines.*

[4] One of the reasons they're timeless, of course, is because sociology is structured around philosophical oppositions that have yet to be resolved.

How to work on your application

"Nick, my soul is made of steel, and both of my parents are senior professors at Princeton, so I'm already emotionally prepared for the NSF and have the cultural capital to understand the meat–and–potatoes of a good application. I didn't come to you for that. I came to you because I want to know how to write a good application and what will get me the fellowship!"

Okay, okay. I have two pieces of workflow advice: (1) who you should work with and (2) how you should write.

Work with everyone

Remember how your NSF reviewers are interested nonspecialists? Well, at Berkeley sociology you are surrounded by a sea of people just like that. From the people sitting next to you in class to the professors you're meeting with, everyone has a well–trained sociological eye for asking big questions and constructing logical arguments. Take advantage of this fact.

A good way to think about your reading is as a series of concentric circles. At the center should be you, the writer. How can you be both reader and writer? Well, take on the sociological "generalized other" and be hard on yourself. Ask tough questions like "do I really need this word?" and "can I express this more simply" as a habit for literally everything you write. The key meta–questions should be "is this a clear expression of my thinking and is it serving my purpose?" You'll discover that your purpose and thinking becomes clearer as you write; the point is to habituate this process of autocritique.

But of course, since you will be working on funding applications you will get to a point where your eyes bleed when you see your own work. You will be able to literally quote every sentence of your application to yourself as you read it, and consequently you will be increasingly useless as a critic of your own work. That's why you need to assemble a trusted cadre of friends and intellectual companions to read your work. They need to be *trusted* in two senses. First, they must have your best interests–or rather, the best interests of your work–at heart. They need to be willing to give your work the time and effort it needs to get better. But they also can't be completely friendly; they also need to be willing to tell you when you're full of shit. This second sense of friendship is really critical—would you rather have someone be nice but useless or harsh but honest? The former may feel better but the latter is much, much more useful to your intellectual development.[5]

You should treasure this close circle of people and frequently get together to read multiple drafts of each other's applications. You should aim to critique both the form

[5]On not being a jerk: of course, part of being a friend is being tough but kind. Reading people's work is not a bloodsport, and if you treat it like one people will hate you and you'll have no friends. More importantly, people will be looking for you to show weakness so they can treasure the shivers of *Schadenfreude.* And take note: your own work is deeply flawed and depends on the same tough–but–kind feedback you owe to other people as an intellectual. So make sure to practice the compliment sandwich and honestly tell people impressive things about their work.

and substance of the applications. There is an important link between the criticism you get and the composition of your circle. As a nervous, insecure first–year, there is an impulse to gravitate to those who share interests or methods with you. Avoid this when it comes to your reading circle. It is *much* better to have your application read by someone who shares a canonical understanding of sociology but not substantive expertise than someone who shares so many assumptions with your approach that they already agree. You'll have to convince the former person on an NSF panel, not the latter. Moreover, there's nothing more destructive and stupefying to sociology as field than substantive and methodological tribalism, so it's a good idea to get out of the habit now.

Beyond the bounds of trusted folks whom you'll grow close over the course of the application process lies the land of senior graduate students. These people are kindhearted former winners–and–applicants to the NSF, Javitz, etc. who are willing to look at your work. How do you find these people and get them to read your work? You probably take classes with some of them, or have met others through alternative means. Understand that you, as a naïf, are relying on their goodwill to read your work. It never hurts to ask, but don't assume that they should or will do it. It also is nice to offer to buy them coffee or beer or to read their work in exchange. You should also only expect them to read a relatively polished draft one or two times (unless someone owes you bigtime for some reason.)

Though this group of senior grad students will also give you form–and–substance advice, they also perform another important function, again linked to whom you ask to read. You should ask at least one person in your substantive area, because to be successful in an NSF, you must not only derive your research from an Important Basic Question, but also strategically cite enough contemporary research on your specific area that you appear to have an effortless mastery of your subject matter already. As mentioned, you're a first year, so how do you find these crucial cites? By getting people who have already taken their qualifying exams to read your work, and suggest key relevant citations. Read these, and decide which are really important and incorporate them.

Once you have gone through multiple drafts in your personal and friendly circle, and have circulated the proposal to senior graduate students and rewritten it, it's time to go to the faculty. The faculty are even busier than senior grad students, so they are only really useful in two very limited—but important!—ways. They're very helpful in early *discussions* when formulating your research question and linking it to a Big Question, and they're helpful at polishing your final proposal. You advisor must read your proposal, because they're likely to be writing one of your NSF letters, but understand that they generally won't have time to give you good formal or stylistic advice (if they do, it will probably be pretty general) and also you don't want to antagonize them by insisting that they read multiple drafts. (Multiple drafts are what the first three circles are for.)

Outline, outline, outline; rewrite, rewrite, rewrite

The mechanics of writing clearly lie at the very core of a successful NSF application, and unfortunately, they're a skill learned only by painful experience and savage autocritique. But like some of the great introductions to nonfiction writing,[6] I can only provide a few tips.

Write like you're playing an accordion. One of the best ways to ensure that your writing has a logical flow and that it never loses the connection between its subsidiary points is to begin with the single, overall point that you're trying to make. Express that thought in a simple sentence, and then decompose it into the logical parts necessary to convince a reader, and then again expand those subsidiary points into the supporting elements they, in turn require. At a certain, arbitrary point (usually when you get sick of the process or reach your word or page limit) you will stop working with an outline and realize that you're now working with a complete, logically organized, concise draft.

Using this method, the process of rewriting is the reverse. Begin by trying to summarize—again in a concise, single, clear sentence—the point you are making in each paragraph. Then discard the supporting detail and decide whether the sentences flow logically by themselves. Then attempt to summarize those sentences into a single, clear overall point to the document that you are writing.

Over the course of expanding and contracting your writing in this way—just like playing an accordion!—you will discover logical flaws, places where you need more detail, and indeed structural components you didn't know you needed. True, this process blurs the boundaries between outlining and writing and produces clear but workmanlike and unspectacular prose. But it also produces polished work quickly and effectively.

Don't get fancy. Writing and rewriting is boring, and it's tempting to add stylistic flourishes to keep yourself entertained. But instead of verbally masturbating, realize that your real goal is to do something so difficult that it will take all your energy to even do acceptably, to say nothing of well: you're attempting to combine empirical precision, analytic cleverness, and theoretical insight into a short project that is comprehensible to nonspecialists. Moreover, effective rhetorical flourish is hard enough to master that by trying to look fancy you'll end up looking stupid. The moral: write clearly, not "well."

Rewrite. You already know this, but ponder it and take it seriously. You cannot rewrite until you write. So get something on paper, and then *obsessively* rewrite it yourself. In my experience, it works best to work on a piece of writing for a couple of days intensively and then let it cool off before returning to it with fresh eyes. This allows your capacity for autocritique—which you should be working hard at developing—to recharge.

[6] Among these I consider the best general introduction to be Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and the best sociological one Mills' critique of Parsons in *The Sociological Imagination.* Ann Lamott's *Bird By Bird* suits some people's taste better. For advice on how to develop an arresting research question, see Davis' "That's Interesting!" [`http://www.mang.canterbury.ac.nz/writing_guide/marketing/index.shtml`].

Beyond these points, I would also strongly encourage you to read and absorb good guides on how to organize writing like Howard Becker's introduction and Zerubavel's *Clockwork Muse.* But the truth is that no amount of reading will compensate for practicing the craft of writing. Two aphorisms appropriately communicate the reality that as a sociologist at Berkeley, you are now a professional analytic writer:

> An amateur practices until they get it right; a professional practices until they can't get it wrong.

> The reality of being a professional is that you can effectively be creative and productive even when that is the last thing you want to do.

Concluding thoughts

As you might have inferred already, my meta–advice is to make your approach to applying to the NSF process oriented. This is a good idea because (1) it will allow you to concentrate on aspects of the process that translate beyond mere application–writing while still producing the most competitive piece of work you can, and (2) they help to emotionally distance you from this little microcosm for the professional world by reducing the emphasis on the Final Product.

What are you doing still reading this? Isn't it time to get writing?