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MONEY WORRIES

*Tackling the Challenges of
Funding Arts-Related Research*

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No handbook on research methodologies would be complete without at least a nod to money matters. But because the “starving artist” phenomenon is just as apt a description of researchers who variously incorporate the arts into their work, we did not see ourselves writing a guide to successful procurement of pots of money; nor did we imagine writing an issues-based essay on the “whys,” “wherefores,” and “whethers” of seeking funding for alternative genre research.¹ Rather, we were more interested in getting a sense of the overall funding picture in the small but growing international community of artist-researchers.

Although we both have had some success in finding money to support our arts-related projects, we came to our first planning meeting worried. Did we know enough about funding issues to write this chapter? Acquiring funding is a struggle, and the pathways we have chosen have not always been straightforward or easy. The rejections have been many. Maybe other social scientists have strategies that work better? Maybe funding is more accessible in other countries? Surely somebody else must know the secrets to making money flow on demand.

We sent out a call for help via e-mail, asking what strategies others have used to try to garner support for their projects. Would they share with us their rejections and successes, along with comments they have received from reviewers? We heard back from 22 researchers from around the world, most of them prolific scholars and seasoned veterans in linking research and the arts.² It was quickly apparent that we were not alone in our struggles to find funding. We read many comments and stories that revealed an unwelcoming political and academic context slow to flow funds to support arts-related research. Below are three examples of such comments from our respondents.

Funding is extremely hard to find. The federal government mostly only funds quantitative or mixed method design studies, and private corporations have been hit hard by the recession.

We have a system here where large grant requests that may be attractive sources for faculty go to centralized university committees in a pre-proposal evaluation. The university then selects which faculty can apply for funding. I have never been selected to submit my work, and the reasons are always tied to comments like “This is interesting scholarship but not research” and “How will you measure improvements?”

We were thrilled to be invited to make a special presentation to the funding agency. This was a really big team grant, and they’d short-listed us and expressed interest in our arts[-related] approaches. But our expectations for being well received were misplaced. We dramatized our introductory remarks, trying to spice things up and make the presentation consistent with our program of innovation. It was about the worst audience you

could hope for. Not a flicker of response across their impassive faces. And then the same old questions started in a consistently hostile tone. The underlying question was whether this should be counted as real research. We were there for over an hour, but we knew after 10 minutes that they had no intention of funding us.

So this is where we begin—with the acknowledgement that funding is a challenge. We could go on for a long time in this chapter about this hard luck reality, moan and complain with complete justification. But we choose to move on to a consideration of how alternative genre researchers have been able to survive, sometimes thrive, in a predominantly hostile environment. There are lessons to be learned. And positive changes in the making.

◆ *Bringing in the Money*

One of the strategies commonly described by researchers incorporating the arts into their work is diverting funds from other research projects or nonresearch sources. For example, “We’re now using a little funding from an actual community project to assist with our research work.”

Sometimes researchers use money from a conventional research project to support their more innovative work. One of our respondents finally succeeded in obtaining funding for a project by including it “as part of a very large proposal where the arts [-related] details were well hidden.” Other researchers conducted conventional projects but then communicated findings through the arts without asking their funders for permission. For example

I’ve always couched my research proposals in terms of conventional social

science—it's only the written end-products that have taken on fictional or other alternative forms. As long as there's a conventional academic report as well, the funding agencies don't care.

Researchers wrote to us about being strategic about which competitions they decided to enter. One person commented, "I go around the system by applying for small grants." Others reported getting most of their support within their academic institutions and avoiding seeking external funds where they thought the odds of success were low. For example, "at the department and college levels I've been able to generate some research dollars, but for the most part the corporate and foundation grantors are hesitant to give money for arts-based research." Some researchers keep their expectations for funding low, pursuing only the avenues that seemed most promising. "Generally, we don't apply for many grants or get much money. We tend to only apply where we think people will be sympathetic to our approaches."

Several respondents noted that they had been able to be more successful in obtaining funds as time went on and they developed a reputation for their work. They stressed the importance of creating a context where people controlling money can feel safe in investing in arts-related projects. For example

My motto is to persevere, and when I get turned down, I learn from it and try again. It helps to start small, have some success, and build incrementally. People respond well to completing research and disseminating it. Once you have a record, it is easier to get the funding.

Another said

Track record is the number one concern for reviewers. So as long as you can demonstrate that you have had success in

obtaining funding and are a productive scholar, they seem more willing to support you. Going back to the same agency also seems helpful. If they awarded you before and you produced "good results," they seem inclined to want to build on that.

Given that the major pots of research money are often not easily accessible to arts-related researchers, there sometimes may need to be a greater reliance on the good will of individuals who control smaller pots of money and exercise power. One of our respondents described how important it is to cultivate such relationships.

X provides most of the money for my work. So I thank him by name in any publications, give him copies of my publications with his name highlighted, invite him to my performances, keep him informed of how the productions went, who and how many attended, where it was presented, etc.

Several of the researchers who wrote to us noted that they had received funds from private foundations. Although foundations vary in size and mode of operation, they are more likely than scientific research organizations to be controlled by one or a few individuals. One respondent described how he pursued a wealthy patron over many months, sending her written materials and videotapes, phoning her at the odd hours she requested, and staging a special performance for the benefit of her and her family. When she eventually provided a smaller-than-hoped-for donation, the researcher was chagrined to overhear her laughing comment to a colleague that she gave the money because "he was such a good beggar."

One enterprising research team consistently approached local individuals and organizations for support for arts-related

projects. After seemingly exhausting this strategy, they decided to raise the stakes.

We wrote a list of all agencies, members of health services and government offices who hadn't contributed or supported our health promotion research and then leaked it to a friendly news agency. Each individual and agency was approached with the potential of their non-support of our work being made public, and surprise, surprise most of them made good. . . . It isn't something we'd advise trying more than once.

Most of the researchers who wrote to us did not attempt to secure private sector funding for their work. Several did explore the possibilities and were successful, but not without some harrowing experiences along the way. One researcher described how he had to turn down the requests of pharmaceutical company representatives to insert the names of their cancer drugs into dramatic scripts. And how he subsequently ended up in the middle of a controversy where sponsoring pharmaceutical companies attempted to set up product displays at public performances against the wishes of local support groups. And then there was the following scenario from another respondent, likely much more entertaining to read about than to live through.

We got a major brewery to provide funding for our research into clinical experiences of alcohol abuse. They provided free alcohol for the intermissions and were keen to promote a safe-drinking message. On the other hand, and not surprisingly, the health agencies dealing with alcohol recovery temporarily withdrew their support for the project. The local police services became the circuit breaker—giving penalty-free alcohol breath tests to audience members and showing how alcohol-impaired individuals believed they'd

not drunk enough to be over the safe limit. Health agencies provided counseling advice and health information literature during these intermission events.

◆ *Paying Our Own Way*

Although many of the researchers we heard from found ways to access project money, others did most of the financing themselves, or were able to do their work without much financial expenditure. Sometimes the costs of being funded, including threats to artistic integrity, outweighed the benefits of support.

One reviewer wanted there to be a more upbeat ending to the tragic stories [of the participants]. Was I to rewrite/fabricate an upbeat ending to the play or keep the drama as it really happened to these adolescents? I opted for the latter.

Securing external funding most often involves having to wait a considerable time for project implementation. Researchers have to balance the satisfaction of moving the creative process forward with the possible implications for their own pocketbooks.

Out of pocket costs for one project were due to me not thinking far enough in advance. This taught me not to be too spontaneously "inspired" and to not try and work too quickly to put up an arts-based research project, but to plan at least 18 months in advance.

A few researchers wrote that they had no funding for their projects, but that this was not a problem for them due to other positive circumstances.

I have neither sought nor received research funding. I have been fortunate to have had support from publishers over the years, and all of my art-based

research is the basis for what I do in my books, essays, lectures, etc.

One researcher felt that she could never have undertaken her arts-related project if she had been in a full-time academic position, where it would have been difficult to find both funding and time for the work. But she nevertheless found it ironic that she was unpaid for her labor.

I was unpaid as the primary person developing the exhibit. So, here I was going around the country talking about how odd it was that my mother made wedding dresses over 50 years for about \$500 total . . . And I was, with every step, mirroring those same relations. It was the only way of getting the work done. I was in a couple relationship at the time and would not have been able to make this grand gesture outside of that financial context.

Sometimes researchers' need to create took precedence over the material conditions of their labor. They did what they needed to do to support their creative process and lived as best they could while they were doing it.

I did most of my early work, and much of my most interesting work, while living for seven years in a microscopic, one bedroom rented condo with peeling paint, temperamental plumbing, and an oven that didn't work. Steinbeck stuff.

While it is unfortunate that more financial support is not available, artist-researchers often go into debt with their wide eyes open, preferring to pay their own way than to compromise their work or turn away from what they most want to achieve.

I went into debt for about two years by paying for our project. The total cost of the project was \$25,000 . . . I do plan on

funding another project like this in the future with my own money. I don't know if the projects will ever pay off in any monetary value, but it will give me personal satisfaction in pursuing my dreams in higher education.

Another commented

Often the costs cannot be anticipated or easily described to fit budget lines or justification required by funding agencies so you do end up out-of-pocket a lot. Having said that, however, it is also true that in our first large (and successful) grant proposal we included a budget for shopping, studio space, construction materials, etc.

◆ *Things Are Getting Better*

Although the environment for arts-related research has been predominantly difficult, there are signs that this is changing, at least in some circumstances. Many individuals using arts-related approaches to research have been able to develop their own programs over time, building a sense of credibility for themselves and for the field. "I have now gained a credible research reputation within my college and am given an annual research/creative activity budget for my work."

I was heartened when a reviewer of one of my grant proposals made a point of acknowledging my "success" in using arts-based methods to challenge the status quo in qualitative research methodology.

With the visible growth of arts-related research over the past decade, institutional administrators are more likely to see alternative genre work as legitimate, sometimes resulting in their fair-minded support of individual scholars.

The recent chairs of our department, as well as the dean, have been fairly responsive to the case I've made that alternative research in the social sciences doesn't have access to the financial largesse available to science, math, etc., and so requires institutional support.

One researcher described her experience at a recent qualitative, arts-focused research conference in Georgia, commenting how she became aware that there is now a generation of successful arts-influenced researchers available to mentor students. And a collective track record of funded projects and publications has been laid down over time, establishing the legitimacy of the field, and making it much more possible for up and coming researchers to be competitive for funds.

There also have been some remarkable successes in recent times, where arts-informed researchers have secured major funding from mainstream scientific organizations. One of us (Ardra with coresearcher Maura McIntyre) received a large grant to tour an exhibit related to Alzheimer's disease across Canada, gathering new data along the way. The second phase of the project also received substantial funding from the same social science research funding agency. The other (Ross) received funding from a very conservative cancer research organization to evaluate a research-based drama about issues facing couples after prostate cancer treatment. And at the Centre for Arts-Informed Research at the University of Toronto, with which we are both affiliated, several graduate students and postdoctoral researchers have received external funding to develop arts-related research programs. Such stories are islands of hope in the larger sea of unfriendliness. But every year there are more such stories/islands. Will reports like the ones below ever become commonplace?

I was largely unsuccessful in receiving grants for arts-based and creative research

projects. Then we received two grants. What is really amazing to me is that after so much rejection, the reviews for both these successful grants were glowing.

In our most recent successful large-scale funding award one reviewer described our "demonstrated commitment to innovative ways of dissemination" as "the major strength of the proposal."

◆ *What Can Be Done?*

How can the momentum that is building for arts-related research continue to grow? What are some steps that will lead to greater acceptance from peers and funders, and that will provide easier access to money necessary for this work? Here are our best guesses:

- The efforts at networking that have been developing among artist-researchers need to continue and intensify so that researchers can learn from each other and create more group visibility. A strong chorus has a better chance of being heard louder and further than several solo voices.
- At conferences, in written correspondence and publications, and in everyday interactions within faculties and institutions, artist-researchers need to promote the importance and relevance of alternative genre research.
- Research units/organizations with an explicit focus on the integration of research and the arts make arts-related research visible and viable within academic and research institutions. The art-research community needs more such structures.
- Experienced artist-researchers have important roles in shaping future decision making via serving on grant

review panels, tenure and promotion committees, student award committees, editorial boards, and so on. The acceptance of alternative genre research is linked to the willingness and commitment of senior faculty to advocate within formal structures/processes.

- Organizations/institutions concerned with arts and research (such as the Society for Arts in Health Care or the Arts-Based Educational Research Special Interest Group or AERA) could produce documents that detail processes, standards, agreements, and values that inform the work of artist-researchers. Similarly, artist-researchers could make a commitment to publishing works that focus on epistemological and methodological issues associated with arts-related research. The existence of such documents will help to provide greater legitimacy for researchers seeking approval for research proposals and ethics protocols.
- Building on their successes, experienced artist-researchers could develop grant-writing workshops to inform students and new scholars, as well as funding organizations, about how arts-related research is conducted, how it can be articulated clearly, and why/how it should be funded.
- Artist-researchers, particularly those who have had success with funding agencies, could advocate for special competitions that focus on the linkage between research and the arts.

◆ *Wrapping Up*

We believe there will be better times ahead for artist-researchers seeking funding for their

work. As noted above, there are encouraging signs and a strengthening momentum generated by first-wave social scientists. It is even possible to imagine a day when arts-related research could be a fully accepted and routinely funded feature of mainstream social science. We want to pause, however, and consider the price of too much success. Drawn as we are to the fringes and to the excitement of making things appear out of thin air, we are well aware of the significant disadvantages associated with becoming mainstream. Nipping at the heels of institutional acceptance are demands for standardization and other regulatory measures of proof that have the potential to undermine the creative thrust of arts-related work. We thus seek a perfect balance in which systemic structures support our work but do not infringe too much on the creative process and the excitement of artistic work. Perhaps we ask too much?

◆ *Notes*

1. We recommend Julianne Cheek's (2000) chapter, "An Untold Story? Doing Funded Qualitative Research," in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* for both guidelines and an excellent discussion of issues related to funding of qualitative research.
2. We thank those who so generously shared with us their stories, strategies, and standpoints.

◆ *References*

- Cheek, J. (2000). An untold story? Doing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., p. 401–420). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.