They’re Just Not That Into Your Research: Rejection in Academia

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For three years, it seemed that getting into graduate school would be my last professional achievement; everything I had tried since then ended in rejection. It started with the grants I applied for in my first year, and it seemed as if it would never end. The worst was a two-month period where I received rejections for a poster, a journal article, a scholarship, and a summer workshop. I was never ambitious enough to believe the mainstream media would pick up my research, but I had thought it would be of interest to others in my field. Instead, at the end of my third year, no one outside my department (and, let’s face it, very few people *inside* my department) knew what I was doing. It posed an interesting philosophical question: If research is conducted, but there is no one who reads about it, does it still matter?

Rejection is a way of life in academia. My advisor has pointed to her own grant rejections as proof that even established researchers are not immune. Journals and funding agencies get many more submissions than they can possibly print or fund. Even well thought out research with significant results and interesting implications isn’t always chosen. But knowing this does not take the sting from that e-mail saying your work did not make the cut. Surviving those rejections with your love for your research intact requires a healthy ego, and even the healthiest ego will eventually take a bruising. Dealing with rejection is one of the most important skills you will develop in graduate school. The techniques below have been suggested by various members of my department, all published psychologists, as strategies for coping with rejection.

Choose when to read the reviews. After my first rejection, I read no further than “We are sorry to inform you…” before moving on to other e-mails. I ignored the e-mail for hours, and even then, I barely glanced at the reviews before forwarding it to my co-author. Those intervening hours before I read the reviews myself helped me get used to the decision, so I could look at the reviews objectively and not with my initial heightened emotions. On the other hand, **s**ome of my lab mates cannot understand how I can put off looking at reviews once I know they are there. They prefer to seek more information about the rejection and immediately start doing something to make the best of it. Even if you do not wait before reading the reviews, you should wait before you respond, or you run the risk of coming across as angry and defensive.

Don’t take it personally. We pour so much of our lives into our research that it can seem impossible to separate our work from ourselves. But even if the only positive comment the reviewers make is about your sample size, the reviewers are not attacking you. It is not you; sometimes, it is not even your research. It is the journal or funding agency, which may simply have a different idea of what is important to the field right now.

Consider the reviewers’ perspectives. I have served as a student reviewer for APS for several years, so I know how hard rejecting a submission can be. Most of the submissions I read are interesting and

clever, but it is just not possible to fund or accept them all. It is the reviewer's job to find the flaws in the research, and most of us are very good at it, perhaps too good: APS President Walter Mischel has pointed out that psychologists might be too tough in our reviews (Mischel, 2008). This may make reviews look harsh, even when the reviewer enjoyed your submission.

Find something meaningful in the reviews. Your first reaction to a review may be, "Did they even read the paper?" But reviews should always have something useful in them. Reviewers may point out an interesting idea for another study, an important new way of interpreting your results, or, at least, a way you can revise the submission to make your points clearer.

Find something ridiculous in the reviews. Sometimes the easiest reviews to deal with are the ones where you wonder whether they even read the paper. This makes it much easier to not take things personally. While you should not start blaming the reviewers every time you get rejected, oblivious reviewers cannot offer much insult to your research.

Find support. Graduate students in my department started passing around inflatable animals for a much-needed morale boost. Positive events, like defending your master's thesis, get you custody of an inflatable flamingo. Negative events, like a Saturday evening meeting with an advisor, get you custody of an inflatable frog. For more mature academics, this may be translated into treating yourself to a nice dinner whether you are celebrating or commiserating.

Celebrate the small victories. I could not quite understand why a professor once congratulated me on hearing that I received a "revise and resubmit" verdict; I did not think I had done anything worth celebrating. In the context of the long fight for publications and funding, however, it was a rare and hard-won achievement worth celebrating.

Set your sights carefully. You do not want to be so worried about avoiding rejection that you miss opportunities, because the things most worth having are the things for which you have to take risks. Still, for your ego's sake, it can be helpful to start small. A poster accepted to a minor conference can provide the courage you need to submit to a famous journal. A string of small acceptances can help take the sting out of any rejection you might receive.

These strategies may help you deal with rejections, but eventually, you will probably still wonder, is it worth it? For a brief period in my fourth year, the seemingly endless string of rejections turned into a brief string of acceptances. The sensation of being a published author is still new enough that I get a small thrill every time I see a reprint request in my inbox. At the moment, this makes the rejections along the way seem worthwhile. Hopefully, this will help when the next rejection inevitably arrives.

References

Mischel, W. (2008). Our urban legends: Grants. *Observer, 21*(10), pp. 3, 17.