Rejection

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"Your Submission."

There it is. The email from the journal. You freeze. Boom, BOom, BOOm, BOOM. Your heart pounds. You swallow. Excitement, anxiety. Click. "Dear Professor", well at least they're polite. Scan the first para. Where is it? Where's the decision? "I have now received three reviews..." the editor drones on in officialese. Yes, yes, and what did they say? "As you can see, the reviews are mixed." The fucking reviews are fucking mixed? Fuck. You know what comes next. Not even worth reading really. They've decided to "decline" (OH FUCK OFF!) your manuscript. But the Editor hopes you'll send your work there again. Fuck. What a disappointment. Rejected. Fuck. That's ruined the day. The week. And it's only 146pm. Got to teach later.

If the above sounds at all familiar, welcome to the club: you've been rejected from a journal. This is a short essay about that experience, and what to do about it. I write it as someone who finds himself tenured and shall we say, charitably, "mid-career". I still get plenty of rejections, but they don't sting as much as they once did. I won't offer "one weird trick", but I do have some thoughts.

What Didn't Work

First, some things that never worked for me. When I was a junior professor trying to get tenure at a major research university just outside Boston, I was "mentored" by senior faculty members in my department. I use scare quotes because nobody, including me or the mentors, knew what this relationship was meant to consist of. So our meetings mostly involved me pretending things were going well, while never revealing that three referees had just this very week ruined my life and made me want to leave the field in a blaze of social media quit-lit glory. What follows are some of the well-meaning things I was told:

- "have you considered..."

It pains me to complete this sentence, because what was said in place of the ellipsis was varied and yet always trivial. Indeed, I had to sometimes remind myself I was having a real conversation with a real person. Advice included: going to the major conference in my field to show off my work

(which I had done for my entire career to date, and now routinely chaired panels at), giving talks at top departments where likely reviewers could see my work (not really a choice variable) and putting papers on my website (said to me by someone who did not, at that time, have a website). Thanks but no thanks.

- "it isn't *personal*"

What people mean by this is that the referees and editors don't dislike you personally, and are not making their decisions on this basis. The problem, of course, is that this is bullshit. First, your work—on which you might spend years just getting the data—is, in fact, very personal. You are the person most associated with this idea or technique or data. So a referee rejecting a paper focussed on that idea or technique or data certainly feels personal. Personal to you, in particular. But second, this sort of comment implicitly assumes that publishing, and success more generally, is not about anything other than the merits of one's work. And this is so obviously false that as a poorly-networked junior professor I found it almost insulting (I cannot imagine what it is like for colleagues in more marginalized communities). So this won't do.

- "this is happening to all the junior professors right now"

Better. But still flawed. First, when I picked up the big journals, they seemed full of junior professor's work. Just not mine. And about 90% of academic twitter and Facebook posts seemed to be about celebrating doing better than the other junior professors (specifically, me). Not-so-humble brags. So it was through gritted teeth that I "like"-d the posts, dying a little with every click. Second, so what? This is the hazing period that I have to get through so I can be accepted as a "real" scholar and my work can be assessed on its merits? This ain't it, Chief.

- "rejections are useful because you get comments that help you make your work better"

I get this. I really do. And it's true to some degree. But journals are so overwhelmed with submissions that there is no particular reason to update that your rejection is something other than a false negative. To a first approximation in my field, at the "top three" journals (which vary by subfield, and by definition of three) everything is rejected — literally, unconditionally, 96% of stuff submitted will not make it. You are damned by faint praise: if the referee doesn't love it, and really make the case on your behalf, it won't appear. And referee reports are high variance, both within and between journals. It is true that they sometimes note common flaws, but more often than not they intensely dislike different aspects of the manuscript: for some it is too technical, for others it is too informal. For others footnote 4 has a typo. And for all the journal must reject. Beyond this, it's not the rejection that improves your paper—it's the reports. Responding to those as part of a revise-and-resubmit offer would make for a much happier me.

What almost worked

Alright, that's the negative. What's the positive? Here are some thoughts that helped, a little at least. Some more than others.

- "you still have the paper."

I heard this from a committee member after my first rejection from a general journal in grad school. The decision itself was swift, brutal and utterly justified by the extraordinarily low quality of my submission. But his point was that while I had gained nothing (well, except some referee reports), I had also lost nothing. The paper still existed. It would still go into my dissertation. I could still submit it elsewhere. It was still "good work" (it wasn't), and so would "find a place" at another great journal (it wouldn't, because it was bad). The problem with this advice, however, is that it isn't very comforting once you are on the tenure track. That's because still *having* the paper is now the problem. You worked on it for two years, it's been rejected four times before, and the last thing you actually want to still have is this fucking thing. You want to now *not* have the paper, because its been published in a journal.

- "why is the rejection "bad"? That is, what are you trying to achieve that you cannot now achieve given the rejection?"

This sounds like psycho-babble, but it helped me somewhat. As I worked my way through the tenure-track, I realized that what I valued about the career wasn't as contingent on publication in top venues as I thought. I wanted top pubs because I wanted tenure. But the reason I wanted tenure was because I wanted intellectual freedom and security (and income!). If I could achieve that without this particular result at this particular journal, I would go a long way to being happy.

Now, clearly, I want my work to be respected and to be read—and major journal publications help that. But I realized that acceptances were merely a means to an end. Get to the end, and the means wouldn't bother me. Indeed, I sometimes tell junior colleagues that most people get tenure at most places most of the time. This is true only in equilibrium, but if you are writing papers and sending them out, you are acting correctly within that equilibrium. So you should get tenure (I'm skipping a few steps for brevity).

A version of this logic that I've seen colleagues in the field use with some success is to switch focus altogether. For them, the idea is not to maximize the number of publications in a given year, but to maximize the number of rejections. Because rejections imply that you have successfully followed the process of being a scholar (researching, writing, sending out), and under some fairly mild assumptions (think approximately no signal in rejections, and a version of the law of large numbers) this is to be celebrated. This never worked for me, but I can see how it might work for others.

- "the optimal rate of rejection is not zero"

How often should you get journal rejections? If the answer is never, you are either

1. doing consistent God-tier work (I am, but unfortunately the god in question is Tartarus) or
2. extremely well-connected and basically everything that is wrong with superstar academics (welcome to the real world, Your Majesty!) or
3. aiming too low.

That is, rejection is an inevitable consequence of being ambitious and "reaching" in terms of quality of outlet. Sadly, that need not be the (only) reason you were rejected. But you miss 100% of the shots you don't take. It just so happens that you miss 99% of the ones you *do* take in academia, but that margin is where all the action is. In some sense, it's easy to never get rejections: spend your entire life working with more senior/famous people and/or never send out your own stuff and/or aim low journal-wise. Be proud you didn't do that.

- "no one knows, and no one cares"

Rejections are intensely personal. Doubtless, you are going through your own private hell as journal after journal declines your best work. But it is *private*—other than the editor (who is handing down 1200 other rejections this year) and maybe the reviewers, no one else knows you have been rejected if you don't tell them. That's not a reason to keep in secret, but it does suggest any shame or embarrassment you feel is entirely self-imposed. An interesting consequence of this is that everybody else thinks your career is going better than you do: they only see the *successes* on your CV (the PhD you got, the papers you've published, the grants you won). And that's the people who actually spend time thinking about your output—which to a first approximation is absolutely no one. No one cares.

What made me feel better

- "life is long"

A lot of life hacks you read are about "living in the moment". This is a hard sell to tenure-track academics, where one's career tends to be in two stages: pressure and ceaseless stress for five or six years, followed by, well, whatever you want. Of course, a tenured professor's life is not without stress and hardship, but relative to other paths, the job is a very fulfilling and secure one. The reason I was trying so hard to publish, and why I took rejections so poorly, was that I thought of myself as being in the "bad times" and trying to get to the "good times". Every paper felt make or break. I found it hard to imagine I would write more papers, and that they would get better: how could anything be better than my job market paper? I wish someone had told me my subsequent work, if I kept at it, would be better. Yours will be. And your life will be easier. Looking back now, it is hard to understand why I was so utterly invested in single papers, when I would end up writing so many more (some worse, some much better). And that brings me to my next point:

- "spread the risk"

I still get rejected. All the time. It still stings, but some rejections sting more than others. The ones that sting the least are the ones where I've written in a team. Anything non-solo, but especially now as I move into Computer Science and Data Science where it is not unusual to have five or six authors on a paper. Why is this? At least part of it is because I have someone to commiserate with when I get rejected: all five of us got dinged, and I know for a fact we don't *all* suck. A problem shared is a problem halved and all that. While political science is moving towards team production as a valid and common mode, it is not yet ubiquitous—and especially not early in one's career. And there are reasons, some good, as to why this is. So simply saying "write with others", which often boils down to "write with senior people who can get things into journals" may not be particularly helpful advice.

But there are several observations that come from this. First, academia is about networks. And, rightly or wrongly, success in academia is about networks of powerful people who want you to do well. Going to grad school with smart, ambitious, well-connected people is the key. But if you are reading this essay, I doubt that's a choice variable for you right now. Co-authoring with people helps you build those networks. A lot. But so does almost anything that involves you being in contact with them: emails, small conferences, etc. I spent too much of my early career feeling—and therefore acting—as if I was on periphery. People thought I was stand-offish and aloof, when I was in fact simply suffering from an extreme form of imposter syndrome. My biggest career regret is not throwing myself into the networks I could have.

Second, one way to spread risk is to diversify. For various reasons, not least being thought a dilettante (the horror!), it may not be wise to write papers on lots of different subjects. But you can write a *lot* of papers, and just send them out and see what sticks. A colleague told me that "if you write enough, they cannot ignore you forever". And I see now that this is right.

Final Thoughts

So what does this essay add up to? If you've just been rejected, it probably doesn't make you feel much better. I don't have the struggles you have. I am old (40), and you are young (34): standards were lower in my day (2015) than they are now (2020). But if it just makes you pause. And not quit the field. And not feel worthless. It will have been worth it. It's just a rejection. Life goes on.

But seriously, fuck that fucking reviewer. What an asshole. My God. What a fucking world.