REPS Manual (3):
Managing Rejection in Academia Before It Manages You

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People who know me well know that I am a baseball fanatic. There are many reasons why I love the game of baseball, but one of the main ones is its resemblance to many aspects of professional political science. Like baseball, political science is a tedious game with seemingly little action on the surface. Political science, like baseball, also requires a long-range vision for scoring points, or rather, working papers, publications, grants, and other awards. But perhaps the sharpest resemblance that political science has to baseball is that one's successes are surrounded by a larger sea of rejections or strikeouts. In baseball, highlight reels mostly emphasize the exciting, but relatively fewer, times that a ballplayer makes contact with a ball, rather than the many more times they fail to do so. Similarly, in the social sciences, a scholar's CV catalogs their successes and accomplishments without giving you a true sense of all the many more failures behind them. Alas, impressions notwithstanding, many successful political scientists are productive *in spite of* the torrent of rejection that constantly rains down on them from journal editors, funding agencies, and colleagues. How do these political scientists do this? By making "minor adjustments," just like baseball players do.

This essay is about some of the "minor adjustments" you can make in order to be productive and feel successful without losing your mind in all of the critical feedback that comes at you as a scholar. In short, this is an essay about managing rejection in academia before it manages you, your career, and your emotional well-being. The main insight here is that managing rejection in academia requires you to take a very careful and sober look at the negative stimuli coming your way so that you evaluate it realistically without it paralyzing your career.

Treat Negative Stimuli as a Social Scientist Would

Let's start with a key definition. By rejection, I'm referring to common negative stimuli that scholars of all stripes face at many points in their career: from critical feedback during research presentations, to having your manuscript declined at a journal, all the way to having a grant application summarily rebuffed. Few people I know enjoy any of these outcomes because they often feel like personal failures. And, as academics, many of us abhor failing at anything, especially something that is research-related. There is much more variance, however, in terms of how people *interpret* these alleged disasters. But how could that be—failure is failure, isn't it? Not really. When confronting these harsh setbacks, we often conflate their *sting* with their *content*. But the two are not the same. Rejection feels bad, but the content of a rejection might have some things worth salvaging. To accomplish this, you must learn to judge judiciously a negative stimulus such as critical feedback. The good thing is that you are already being trained to do this as a social scientist.

Part of your disposition as a graduate student and your training as a scholar is to be skeptical and circumspect. It often takes a strong dose of evidence to really convince any one of us that some specific claim is true. And so it should be with negative stimuli coming your way. Imagine a common scenario. Your advisor or a trusted peer reads something of yours, critically. In the privacy of your own home or other safe space, you feel cruddy, even though you asked for the feedback. "God, I'm stupid." "How could I forget to do this or that?" These are only some of the select set of generically negative thoughts that might swirl in your head. But are they true? Did your critic actually call

you stupid? Is it unreasonable that you may have forgotten to do something, which your critic pointed out? What is the empirical evidence for any of these reactions of yours?

My point is simply that you must allow yourself to be an empiricist when it comes to critical feedback about your work. If criticism does not have incontrovertible evidence behind it, then maybe you should not be judging yourself as harshly. In fact, the evidence that you think confirms a criticism—e.g., a critic's tone, their words, or their demeanor—is substantively unimportant: although it jolts your feelings, it is secondary to what you should be spending your attention and emotional energy on. What you need to care about is the content of the advice, regardless of its valence.

Managing Rejections at Journals and Funding Agencies

This theme about being an unrelenting empiricist toward negative feedback underlies much of my disposition toward rejections in different areas of my day-to-day work. I will illustrate this by discussing how I use this orientation in light of rejections at journals and criticisms in public fora. I'll start with rejections at journals.

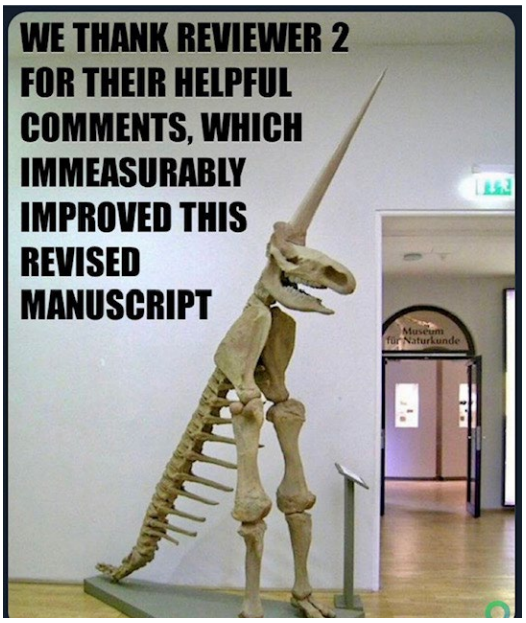
Independent of the time one spends on a research project by refining it into written form, every scholar engages the peer review process at a journal with incredibly strong headwinds. Academic journals generally reject most of the submissions that they receive, with more elite journals rejecting at even higher rates (90% or greater). The odds are hardly in anybody's favor. Rule number one is to be highly self-aware about this empirical fact because nobody—regardless of their stature—is immune from this chopping block. As a self-propelled professional, this means you must not leave

anything up to chance that you can control—what you write, how you frame it, how much you revise it, how you present it, etc. But it also means letting go of your work once you've passed a threshold of self-satisfaction with it, which should be seconded by trusted peers and advisors.

What you are aiming for during a journal submission is an invitation to revise and resubmit your paper—a status indicating that your reviewers found promise in your work, but believe it needs further attention in some (many) respects, whether these are conceptual, theoretical, and/or methodological. But even invitations to revise and resubmit ("R&Rs") are also becoming increasingly less prevalent, with more competition at journals and pickier reviewers. In short, you should give the journal roulette a whirl, but expect your submission to be returned with a usually polite "no" by the editor.

You may wonder: why should I go through this self-flagellation, if the odds are stacked against me? Because at many institutions of higher learning, publications are the (or a) key consideration in your advancement in the field and your progression through faculty ranks. When a submission of yours is rejected by a journal, it is generally accompanied by a set of (negative) reviews. That's the moment you have to put on your empiricist hat. Focus, not on *how* a reviewer delivered their feedback (academics aren't known for their bedside manner), rather, focus on the *content* of their advice. What did they ask you to do? Can you do it? Will it make the paper better?

Figure. A Meme Reflecting Avoidable Challenges with Revising a Manuscript in Light of Peer Review (*Source:* unknown)



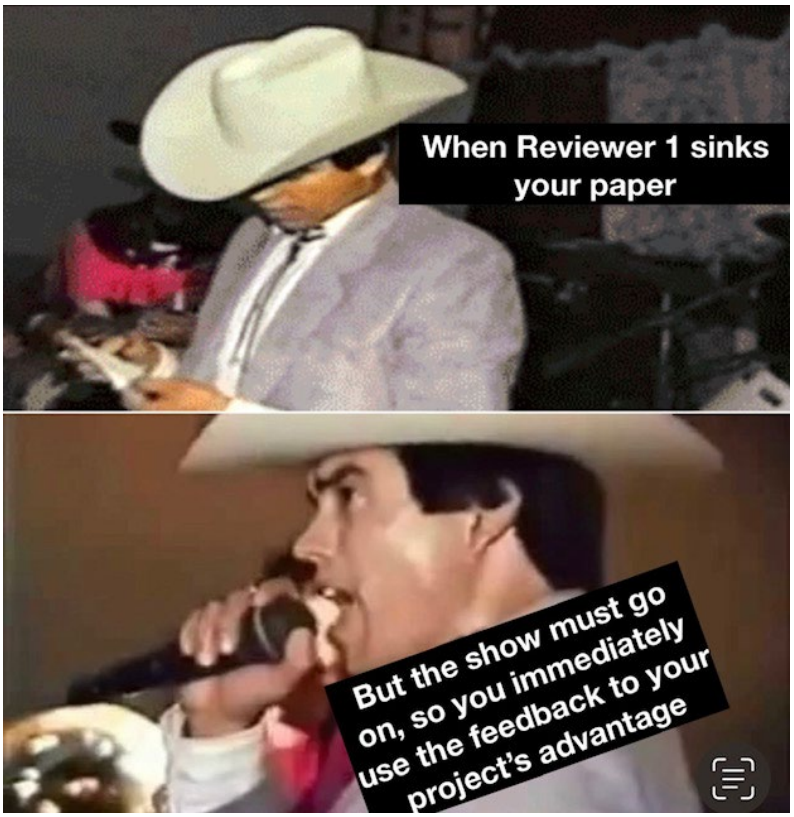
Many individuals, I think, have a tough time answering for themselves this last question—i.e., whether a piece of feedback is worth integrating into a revised manuscript. One way to answer this for yourself is to acknowledge the following. By the time you have written and submitted your paper for peer review, you have already convinced yourself about its merits. Your job now is to convince others—typically non-experts on your topic—about the promise of your work. Viewed from this angle, a lot of reviewers' curmudgeonly advice is actually worth your time. This doesn't mean you necessarily incorporate it whole hog. Instead, it means you make the feedback *work for your paper* by expanding its breadth and relevance, whether in terms of theory and/or evidence. Indeed, if you merely take the feedback you receive and incorporate as is, you are likely to end up with a paper like the one in the meme above. One of your most

important scholarly duties, then, is to absorb the feedback you receive without completely compromising yourself as a scholar. Some flexibility is warranted.

But let's assume (realistically) that your project is declined at the first journal you submit to. Perhaps the most fundamental piece of advice to follow in light of a rejection is this: **DO NOT** sit on the rebuffed project! Although one journal and set of reviewers said no, there are plenty of other journals (and additional reviewers) that can review your piece, provided you address those comments that appeared to have sunk your battleship at the initial venue. "But rejections hurt!" Yes, they do. They also hurt me. But your career depends on the production and placement of articles and books. When you dwell on the pain stemming from the rejection—and all the interpretations you give to it—you are eating up limited time and substantial emotional energy, rather than using both of these to rehabilitate your paper and place it back under review as soon as possible—which is what is ultimately under *your* control. The sooner you transition from a rejection to another run at the hoop, the sooner you re-engage the slow process that is peer review. In sum, control the things you can (e.g., your paper's quality in light of feedback) and bracket those things that you cannot (what do the anonymous referees think of me? It's not fair that my paper was rejected despite my best efforts!).

To bring this point full circle, you should be like the *norteño* singer, Chalino Sánchez, in the meme below. In 1992, this star of Mexican regional music was giving a concert to a packed crowd in Coachella, California when he received a note, onstage, declaring he would die later that night. In true Chalino form, he ignored the note and continued the show to the adoration of his fans. So it should be with your research.

Figure 2. A Meme Reflecting the Urgency in Rehabilitating Your Rejected Manuscript to Re-Engage the Peer Review Process (source: Efrén Pérez)



We will often receive "bad" news, but how we construe it matters for how we deal with it. In the case of Chalino, he was murdered by an unknown assailant later that night, but not before closing out his most memorable live concert. Be like Chalino—if you receive a rejection, don't let your project die at that point. The show must go on until—and only until—you receive an unambiguous message that your project is dead on its tracks, which is typically not the case, if I am being really honest.[1] In fact, consistent

[1] Much of what I have discussed in the preceding section can also be applied, in principle to rejections at funding agencies, with some caveats. Two caveats are: 1) there are relatively fewer funding agencies and times to apply to them than there are journals; 2) peer-review at many funding agencies are single-blind, rather than double-blind. That is, at some funding agencies, you will not know who your reviewers are, but they will know who you are.

with this, I usually start picking up the debris from a rejection the day after I receive it. It's not that I'm a robot. Rather, I follow my own advice and work to de-couple the sting of the rejection from its content. By the first day after the rejection, I generally have a list of items that require further attention, and so I begin going down that list, making sure to prioritize the one's that I think are tougher to address.

Managing Critical Feedback in Public Fora

Unlike criticism and rejection at a journal, where you are unlikely to know who your referees are, critical feedback at public presentations usually happens in real-time. Here, response to criticisms demands quicker, but still measured, on-the-spot reactions. This requires some rapid thought immediately prior to replying. For example, I ask myself, in the split-second before I respond to a question or criticism: how should I react without being the hot-headed Latino in the room?

Yes, it is unfair that this racialized consideration even has to weigh into my decision-making. But the reality on the ground is that how I react has implications for how some people see other scholars of color. So, I try to ensure that my reaction leaves my reputation intact, while also giving me with the last laugh (usually, through a much stronger project because of the criticism).

When you are a member of a minoritized group, like I am, a negative stimulus—such as critical feedback—can easily feel like a personal attack. My first piece of advice, then, is to adjust your responses to the context at hand, not to the very real trauma(s) that produced that more impulsive and very understandable reaction you'd like to unleash in light of harsh criticism. The easiest thing to do here, I find, is to give a critic

the benefit of the doubt. Rather than dissect their motives, I try my hardest to understand what they are asking and from what vantage point. I then try to answer in a way that is on their plane. To better accomplish this, I focus on the content of the question, which I take literally and answer literally. Why bend toward your critic in this way? Remember, you are likely already convinced about the merit of your own idea; you don't need to be further persuaded. But they do. And your critic is not only telling you they don't believe you, in some shape or form. They are also giving you some indications about what it would take for them to be persuaded. Take advantage of that SWAG for your own intellectual sake and growth.

My second piece of advice in this setting is to avoid being surprised by negative feedback. You have to walk into a talk or presentation expecting some effort by the audience to pick apart your work. We may not want to hear this criticism, but we need to—for the sake of our work's quality and reach. Look, social science is an enterprise that is rooted in critical feedback—it's baked into the cake. Yes, there is often much to be left desired in terms of how that feedback is often delivered by individuals, but the reality is that it is ultimately critical and our work grows and evolves based on it. I deal with this in two ways. I always agree to a presentation knowing full well that I'm going to be told by people, in some shape or form, that they are unpersuaded. I expect it, so I am less surprised by it. Moreover, when a critic is abrasive and aggressive (or both), I quietly remind myself that those are their problems, not mine. I can't manage their lack of impulse control or their relative absence of social skills. But I can manage mine. I

focus instead on the content of their comments and take abundant mental and written notes.[2]

My final piece of advice is twofold. First, you have to incessantly remind yourself that the expert in the room about the topic at hand is YOU, not your audience—that's why you are the panelist or invited speaker. This means that in light of criticism, it is well within your prerogative to disagree or push back. But when you do, you have to ensure your position is less assailable than theirs. This means you must be select in expressing strong disagreements. You can accomplish this by asking yourself: is this something that really needs to be corrected? Remember, not everything in an academic conversation is a battle. Finally, sometimes it is just fine to say you don't know. As lifelong learners, we all have limits. But rather than just cave before a critic, it is often helpful to explain out loud to them why you may not know something. That acknowledgement alone can help show why a critic's stance is also on shaky ground.

Coda

Social and political psychologists teach us that negative stimuli of all kinds elicit sharper pain and more attention.[3] It is an evolved feature of our cognitive hardware. The goal of this brief essay is to encourage you to acknowledge key negative stimuli in your professional development and life. Criticism and rejection are built-in features of social science research at every stage of a career. Yes, it is very hard not to experience

[2] This involves taking mental notes about character and integrity. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, "when somebody shows you who they are, believe them." Alas, political science is a small, small world.
[3] Soroka, Stuart. 2014. *Negativity in Democratic Politics: Causes and Consequences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

these negative outcomes without one feeling bad about them *and* obsessing over them. But to advance in this profession, my advice is to practice quickly, how to disentangle the pain of negative stimuli, from its informational value—for it is in learning how to harness the latter for your own benefit that will leave you feeling like a pro (or, at least, not like a rookie).