Addressing academic rejection: Recommendations for reform

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a number of reasoned and evidence-supported arguments and a list of recommendations for reducing the impact of academic rejection. A brief literature review examined the prevalence and negative impacts of academic rejection including its purported purposes, predictors, and consequences. Findings revealed that the topic of academic rejection is largely under-studied, with very few empirical investigations. The extant literature typically places the onus on the individual academic to deal with rejection. Few articles have recommended institutional changes to ameliorate the known mental health impacts of rejection. We propose that the discovery and dissemination of knowledge are among the core purposes of academia, and that scholars are far more likely to contribute through institutional and systemic support. Several elements of the current approaches are contraindicated, thus, we recommend several changes, at both the individual and institutional levels to reduce opportunity costs for grants and funding, improve the publication process, and promote academics' mental health and wellbeing. When examining academic rejection through the lens of effective learning, the vast literature of feedback can support important changes to how publications are accepted and rejected. Considering the limited literature pertaining to academic rejection, we present recommendations for changes in how academic performance can be evaluated, for the benefit of both the academy and the mental health of its members.

Keywords

Cover Page Footnote

Scholarly success in many academic institutions is largely based on submitting one's papers, grant applications, teaching outcomes, research profile, and in the case of applying for a promotion or a job, one's entire academic-self for scrutiny, ranking, or evaluation (Allen, 2019; Carson et al., 2013). Of course, these types of assessment take place in many industries. However, the academy has a prowess for turning assessments into *scientific* exercises in their own right. After all, assessing things is the business of academia. In the institutional framework, this can range from the peer review process, through extensive government assessments of departmental or institutional research outputs, to lengthy self-assessments against complex sets of criteria when applying for promotion. These assessments can range from the empirical to the pseudo-scientific, but whatever their degree of rigour – they provide the ongoing background hum of academic life. The corollary of this culture of assessment is that rejection – of one's ideas, output, and even one's whole self – inevitably becomes commonplace.

The purpose of the academy in particular, and scientific endeavours in general, is to discover and disseminate truths about one's discipline, largely through research, teaching, and engagement (Miller, 2019). Herein, we present the case that some methods of measuring academic success are counter-productive to these purposes of academia. To fulfil these purposes, academics need to be satisfied, motivated, productive, and contributing in the long term to a body of robust knowledge (Han et al., 2019). Based on a broad body of psychological evidence, however, academia's rejection culture runs counter to these purposes (Day, 2011).

The problems with rejection

Academics operate in a culture of rejection – their career prospects, grant funding and even the viability of the universities in which they work, are all based largely on their publishing record (Carson et al., 2013). The rejection rate for articles submitted for publication varies widely, but is consistently high, ranging between 50 to 90 percent (Woolley & Barron, 2009). Evaluating the performance on a scholar using such a binary outcome, heavily weighted to the negative, arguably leads to a counter-productive – even toxic – culture, unconducive to the overarching goals of academia (Morrish, 2019; Weare, 2019).

Etymology of rejection

The word, rejection, itself has a strong, negative valence, evidenced by its etymology. From the Latin *re* (back) and *jacere* (throw), it translates literally to 'throw back,' or in other words, to actively exclude (Moore, 2003). A reject (noun) means "a person considered low-quality and worthless," while reject (verb) has synonyms such as 'throw away,' 'cast out,' 'repulse,' and 'vomit' consistent with its Old French roots (Stevenson, 2010, p. 3893). The language itself is hardly encouraging or affirming, and yet the word rejection is used pervasively by academics, institutions, and journals, despite mounting psychological evidence of the damage that negative

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language can wreak on a person's mental health (Evans et al., 2008; Gorczynski, 2018; Winefield et al., 2003).

The mental health of academics

Considering the demands for performance and productivity, higher education is a precarious context for managing mental health (Evans et al., 2018). Many faculty report challenging workloads, financial challenges, and high levels of stress (Else, 2017; Winefield et al., 2003). Adding to these concerns are the complexities surrounding decades-old systemic pressures that nurture a culture of rejection (Morrish, 2019; Weare, 2019). Gorczynski (2018) reported that the mental illness rates among academics was at an all-time high, with 43 percent of academics revealing "symptoms of a mild mental disorder," double the proportion found in the general population. He cites over-workloads and funding pressures as the major factors. Other researchers have found that academics suffer stress-related ill-health at alarmingly high rates – even higher than police or medical staff (Kinman & Wray, 2013, 2014; Wray & Kinman, 2020).

A culture of rejection affects academic mental health in at least two ways. First, the workloads of academics has consistently been shown as an important factor in academic mental health (Morrish, 2019), and a major component of an academic's workload is disproportionately dedicated to submitting articles and grant applications that, on the balance of probabilities, are going to yield rejection. These pressures occur in an environment where there are also demands on teaching and supervision, there are moves to make academic teaching more exchangeable using online methods, and more PhD students are graduating and in some domains are competing for a step into academic tenure. Second, a culture of rejection has a significant impact on work satisfaction, productivity, and general wellbeing, especially given the association of rejection with feelings of grief and loss (Allen, 2020; Han et al., 2019).

Reforming the rejection culture

The normalise rejection idea

In 2017, Dr Nick Hopwood (of University Technology Sydney, Australia) posted a Twitter image of his office wall covered with rejection letters. Hopwood encouraged academics to celebrate rejection (of publications and grant applications), rather than viewing it as a sign of failure. His top tweet used the hashtag #NormaliseRejection – an approach supported by academics in the Twitter community and the published literature (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018). Normalising negative emotions as common experiences are a viable psychological approach – as are other notions of just accepting that rejection is just 'a part of the job,' or focusing energies on ensuring that graduate students and early career researchers (ECRs) develop a capacity for resilience and coping (Blackwell, 2010; Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018) something that is encouraged extensively in other settings and sectors (Almazan et al., 2018; Frydenberg, 2018; Frydenberg et al. 2012; Mohammadinia et al., 2019).

However, a focus on normalising rejection and building resilience, places the responsibility on the individual academic. When academia has a submission result ratio for grants, articles, and jobs skewed so heavily towards rejection rather than acceptance, we need to consider what can be done at the institutional level to mitigate the effects. Rejection in the academy has the potential to contribute to a toxic work environment, so it may be more effective to reform rejection rather than normalise it. To this end, the remainder of this paper offers three research-informed areas of consideration to help shift the culture of academia away from rejection, and towards one more conducive to the objectives of the academy, and the mental health of academics.

A focus on the individual, not the culture

The 'normalise rejection' movement is part of a more general paradigm within the academy – that rejection is something with which the individual academic must deal; it is not an issue requiring systemic or institutional changes. A systematic search of Publish and Perish (Harzing, 2010) for the term "academic rejection" (with no other criteria) returned only 364 papers worldwide, none of which focused on institutional changes. Instead, the literature was replete with papers offering advice and recommendations for individual academics: from how to become "the battle- hardened academic" (Chan et al., 2020, p. 13), to coping strategies specific to female academics (Evans et al., 2008), as representative examples.

Propositions for reducing rejection in the academy

An evidence-based alternative

There is a robust body of scientific research that points to a far better alternative. The learning sciences have shown repeatedly that both effective feedback and clearly defined criteria for success is conducive to high achievement (see Hattie, 2011; Hattie & Clarke, 2018; Hattie & Donoghue, 2016). When so-called 'success criteria' are explicit, specific and achievable, learners learn more quickly and effectively. Whilst no research we know of has measured this directly, it is reasonable to infer that if academics were provided with such explicit, measurable and achievable criteria for professional success, they would learn and therefore achieve more highly. The moving targets of publication criteria widespread in academia are not conducive to professional development.

Similarly, feedback is strongly associated with better learning and performance (see Kulhavy, 1977). Decades of research in this field has shown there are important nuances for feedback to be effective: it needs to be carefully timed (Kulik & Kulik, 1988), task-oriented (Sadler, 1989), non-personal (Deci et al., 1999) and incremental (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In particular, feedback must also be bi-directional and well-received by the learner (Brooks et al., 2019) to be effective, thereby allowing the learner to identify where they are now, where they need to be, and how to (incrementally) get there (Hattie, 2009). In contrast, the practice of a binary rejection or acceptance, widespread in academia, runs counter to these principles in that it focuses

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on a single achievement (pass or fail) and does not necessarily provide the academic with a clear path to improvement. There is a move to acknowledge this use of feedback as improvement in some of the more recent Open Access journals – with requests for reviewers to focus on improvement, often with multiple rounds, and with publication of reviews this puts pressure to be more improvement focused. Finally, there is evidence from psychology shows that a focus on the negative aspects of performance is less effective in improving one's performance than a positive focus (Fredrickson, 2001; Waters et al., 2017). The culture in which proposals and publications are overwhelmingly rejected (with its implicit negative valence) is the essence of a negative focus even despite some reviewers' tendency to soften the rejection decision with some positive feedback in reviews.

Taken together, these bodies of research indicate that to achieve the best performance, learning and development of academics, the pass/fail rejection/acceptance culture is far from ideal, and would be better replaced with a system that provides very clear criteria for success, provides constructive and realistic feedback on the academic's work, and through a positive and optimistic lens, focuses on what the academic could/should do next to further improve. Considering the exigent concerns articulated above, we delineate three core areas for consideration that may be particularly useful to reform: Reduce Opportunity Costs for grants and funding, improve the publication process, and promote academics' mental health and wellbeing.

Area 1. Reduce opportunity costs for grants and funding

By explicating specific, clear and achievable criteria for success, and by providing explicit, timely task- and improvement-focused feedback, academics would spend less time and effort on tasks that most likely lead to rejection. In many current grant awarding processes, academics' effort to complete lengthy application forms and align the proposal strategically with the fund providers' priorities are wasted if the panel of reviewers rejects the application. A study showed that for one round of a funding scheme in Australia, researchers altogether spend more than five centuries worth of working years in time spent preparing proposals (Barnett et al., 2015). One solution already occurring in some institutions is conditional funding for the applications that have passed a quality threshold.

There are also many proposals to improve the chances of success and the funder and reviewers should never be the first readers of proposals. Building internal communities of academics as critics of proposals, having systems to ensure initial ideas are rated as high probabilities for continuing to submit, and providing seed funding to proposals rated by the funder as highly recommended but not funded in this round. Institutions could also make it easier for grant funding bodies to approach individual researchers directly. Targeted grant giving saves time for both the researcher and the fiduciary agency but this is common now for some funders (e.g., MacArthur fund) and strategies would need to be put in place to ensure this system did not favour senior academics over earlier career academics. Academics could consider what information should be included on their public professional online profiles to facilitate this. Alternatively, large

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national grant funding bodies could leave the management of funding allocation to the Universities themselves.

Area 2. Improve the publication process

Advancement in academia is largely determined by scholarly publications, particularly one's publication record (Garner et al., 2018; McKiernan et al., 2019). The greater number of publications in higher-ranking journals, the higher the academic is regarded; and journals themselves are ranked according to the number of citations their published articles yield (Allen, 2019; Hirsch, 2005; Horn, 2016; Slattengren et al., 2019). In some regions, academic institutions are assessed similarly – the combined impact factors of their researchers are widely used to attract staff, research funding and new students (Liefner, 2003). The acceptance of articles for publication therefore has important consequences for academics, academic institutions, and journals alike.

Journal editors and associate editors in larger disciplines with high submission volumes could desk-reject more submissions, a practice that has grown rapidly in recent decades. Yet, rejection after peer- review has been found to occur more frequently than desk-rejected papers at most journals; despite the reverse being true for journals with an impact factor greater than nine (Paine & Fox, 2018). Research by Hui-Chen Han and colleagues (Han et al., 2019) found that in order to help put authors out of their Manuscript Rejection Syndrome (MiSeRY), journal editors should be more selective in the manuscripts they send for external review. Prompt rejection, coupled with kind, thoughtful, and constructive guidance to further enhance the paper would benefit the authors, as well as subsequent scholarship and submissions. Quicker rejections with the possibility of resubmitting may allow for researchers to have a better chance at the peer review stage when a manuscript is suitable for review, and have an ancillary benefit of much faster turnaround when they do not. This is still rejection, but it is time-effective rejection, as it provides better and more constructive (i.e. performance-enhancing) feedback.

Journal publishers and editors should embrace a policy of forwarding and receiving the peer reviews of rejected manuscripts when they are submitted to another journal, taking account of revisions made in response to the reviews rather than starting the process again from scratch. While this practice may be perceived by some as beginning with a potential bias against a paper (as it was previously rejected by another journal), this practice would lead to time savings for all parties concerned and is already in operation at some journals.

Area 3. Promote academics' mental health and wellbeing

A rejection culture can be psychologically damaging, and unnecessarily so. There are, however, proven methods that both individuals and institutions can adopt to reduce its toxic impact. We provide the following three recommendations to address this important issue: recognise professional achievements, increase mentorship and collaboration, and recruit peer mentors.

Institutions could provide awards for teaching and research performance (amongst other things). Most institutions already have many awards for teaching and for research, but fewer for both in the one academic. One novel idea could be to reward academics in the absence of an application process. It is worth pondering whether awards to employees based on merit and observations, objective metrics, rather than skills at completing yet another application form has a place in academia? Initial filtering, if needed, could take place via nomination, but with the proviso that the information required is feasible for a third party to provide quickly. Of course, the right for an academic to refuse an award would always be at their own discretion.

Faculties could reduce the chances of rejection experienced by early career researchers (ECRs) and graduate students by ensuring opportunities for mentorship exist and encouraging collaboration (Paul et al., 2002). Collaboration is desirable in academia, and should be encouraged, hence, the practice in some universities of allocating only partial recognition (for Key Performance Indicators [KPIs], for example) for multi-authored papers, would need to be changed. As illustrated in previous research mentoring is useful for helping mentees with teaching, research, and career planning and that visible support for mentoring is important for its success (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016).

Peer-mentoring may provide a more inclusive publication practice that could result in a more diverse representation of authorship in the academic literature. Further, peer-mentoring enhances learning from preschool to higher education (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 1982; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), builds community and social connection (Cook et al., 1985), and improves research productivity for both mentor and mentee (Paul et al., 2002). Journal publishers and editors could consider recruiting peer-mentors and senior academics who are willing to mentor junior academics to help them improve their research outputs either before or after the peer review stage. This model, used by a limited number of journals already (e.g., The *Journal of Belonging, Identity, Language and Diversity* for example) potentially provides a more inclusive and equitable approach for-authors who might otherwise face rejection based on academic literacy, written English language skills, or fewer opportunities for academic mentorship (e.g., job insecurity) irrespective of the significance or quality of their research. It would equally build community within academia, and enhance the professional development and learning of its members.

Conclusion

We have mounted three broad arguments regarding the rejection culture in academic performance. First, the current system of extensive academic rejection negatively can affect the mental health of some academics (Day, 2011; Horn, 2016). Second, the prevailing rejection culture is counter-productive to the development, learning and improvement in academics' fulfilment of the purposes of academia (Day, 2011; Kolesnikov, et al., 2018), although there is no desire to increase the already huge corpus of publications with lower quality articles. Third, we have identified that the

scant research on the topic focuses almost entirely on an individualistic response, and ignores potential cultural, systemic, or institutional change.

If we normalise rejection, it may be possible we help to perpetuate it. While it is undoubtedly necessary that academics cultivate their skills in coping and resiliency, institutions also have a responsibility to look at ways of reducing the impact and volume of rejection where they can. Individual academics have a role to play in advocating for these kinds of changes. The academy as a whole needs to become conscious of the effects rejection can have and seek to avoid the implementation of new forms while mitigating those already in place. It is hard to see how reducing experiences of rejection could make academic life anything but better.

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