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Publish or perish: rejection, scientometrics and academic success

Adrian Furnham[1]

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There have been, over the years, personal reports and studies done on the academic process of peer review (Furnham 2013; Jaremka et al. 2020). Here I offer personal reflections and advice on the psychology of "publish or perish". It is based on a presentation to young researchers I was asked to give a decade ago, and every year subsequently, which is not dissimilar to the symposium presented to the SPSP (Jaremka et al. 2020).

In this symposium and long paper the authors note how fellow academics experience professional challenges like repeated rejection, impostor syndrome, and burnout. They are that discussing these experiences is taboo and censored, creating a sense of loneliness and isolation for many, particularly young academics who assume they are the only ones affected by rejection. Their aim in the symposium and related paper was to "normalise" the experience.

Anyone who has sat on an academic selection committee knows the things that really count on a CV. This seems to transcend disciplines and countries and tends to be more common at elite universities. The answer, of course, is primarily the quality and quantity of publications measured by scientometric data.

This has become so common that it is not unusual for people to put the impact factor of the journal as well as the number of times the paper has been published. For instance:

Smith, J. (2010). This and that. *International Journal of Wisdom*, 22, 1–10 (IP 2.720; *Citations* 27).

This helps the non-specialist get some idea of the impact of the candidate's publications. It is said that committees would rather "count than read" and that this process helps them do just that, *and* come to better conclusions.

Some committees insist that they are given the google scholar metrics particular the H Statistic of each candidate. There is an extensive and passionate debate about the justice and wisdom about using these metrics, but they remain popular in the face of nothing as comparably simple and available, particularly non experts.

Young hopefuls know this as do their supervisors and they get encouraged to publish their work. Hence *publish or perish.* Historians will tell you that the phrase was used almost 100 years ago. This issue is so important to an academic career that departments may run workshops on how to get published in top journals.

✉ Adrian Furnham
adrian@adrianfurnham.com

[1] Norwegian Business School (BI), Nydalveien, Olso, Norway

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The statistics are deeply discouraging. It takes a long time to write a paper with the literature review, data collection and analysis and the write up. Even if done in large teams of experts it takes many months. Writing grant applications can be equally demanding. The rejection rate for top journals and grant money often exceeds 90%, and that number may be 60–80% for "mid-tier" journals. Thus, months of intense ego-involving work can be rudely rejected which is particularly difficult for young staff seeking tenure (if that still exists).

So how to be more successful and productive? I should say I have some experience of this. I have had over 1200 papers published in peer-reviewed academic journals mainly in psychology but also economics, education, medicine and psychiatry. I kept for 35 years all correspondence and have over 4000 reviews of papers accepted and rejected.

It is, of course, particularly amuzing to read rejection letters of papers subsequently published and cited. I have one where the paper was rejected four times and which now has over 500 citations. Also, in my view my three best papers don't even appear in the top 150 of my cited papers.

Last year I inspected my Google Report with his google citation of 106, 420, the H index 154 and the i10-index 1024 (Furnham 2020). It led me to derive eight lessons:

Lesson 1: High impact journals do not guarantee high personal citations (at all).
Lesson 2: Innovative studies are more difficult to get published but (often) cited most.
Lesson 3: Publish good reviews as frequently as good papers for most impact.
Lesson 4: Books are, but chapters in edited books are less, cited.
Lesson 5: Papers, however good, at the end of a fad or trend are less cited over time.
Lesson 6: Choose general journals in better cited disciplines for most impact.
Lesson 7: Don't put all your eggs (papers) in one basket (journal) however good it is. Spread the good news.
Lesson 8: Spend effort in constructing valid tests/measures in a new area for maximum citations.

The life of an academic researchers has, like all jobs, joys and sorrows. The life of a paper writer may be peculiarly difficult. Some years ago an epidemiologist Kaun (1991) conducted a fascinating study of the longevity of artists from architects to writers, composers to conductors, painters to photographers. The writers, whose mean age of death was only 61.7 years, lived 10 years *less* than most of the other groups.

His answer lay in *hedonic calculus*. First, the product has often a (very*) long time to completion*. Second, writing is *a painful, lonely process*. It is often difficult, demanding and unsatisfying. Third, there is the issue of *rejection* which is common. This experience is well known to all academics.

The submission and rejection process

Simply submitting a paper to a journal (before even getting a desk rejection) is not easy. One is at the mercy of journal 'fetishism': formatting, length restrictions, and reference style. Some make you change all references and formatting only to desk reject the paper.

You will experience angry, bitter, *anonymous* referees who could, and may be should, be taken to court for the vicious *ad hominem* attacks and never signing their letters.

You will find *lazy* (and overworked) editors who make no decisions simply relying on any reviewer, however competent, who (to their relief) accepted the (possibly thankless) task of reviewing the paper.

Disciplinary obsessions where if you cross some boundary from say psychology to psychiatry to epidemiology to sociology suddenly all the priorities change.

The time from conception to publication with 2–24 months for response from the journal; 3–24 months for publication after acceptance. In some areas the field has moved on since the paper was submitted.

There is also the issue of costs: journals may charge you (more so now) even the "non predatory" kinds. Some, in finance, charge a reviewing fee, as well as a publication charge. Yet there remain, from a long-distance past, even some journals who (quite rightly) pay the author (like book publishers).

The apprenticeship is, like journal choice and submission is a long one. Best consult a few wise and successful academics for advice.

Recommendations on receiving a rejection letter

I have seen young PhD students deeply hurt and depressed on getting a typical rejection. Here is the advice I give them:

Read the reviewers twice: first scan for good/bad news. Then read carefully and consider questions and recommendations:

1. Is there a serious fault (confounding variable; no control group) that can't be fixed. If so, abandon the paper but redesign to correct the issue. Treat it as a learning experience and remember that it has happened to everyone.
2. Are the reviewers being helpful or just destructive? Is there peevish, pettiness about essentially trivia or are they making serious suggestions for how to really improve the MS? Cheap, destructive, ego-wounding comments are usually made by those less productive themselves. Take the advice of the helpful reviewers seriously always remembering that they may be wrong or calling for the impossible. It is, or should be, their job to seriously evaluate the paper. Remember that reviewers might be reviewers of the same paper if resubmitted to another journal, particularly if the topic is highly specialist.
3. Do the reviewers agree? Often not, but editors take sides with the most critical and negative: *Always*. We all know the power of negative over positive information. It is risky to point this out to editors. However, agreement means reliable judgements worth taking more seriously.
4. Has the editor taken an active part in the decision making or has she/he simply "assembled" the comments of the reviewers? Consider whether they will send the revision to the same reviewers as they will not take responsibility for the decision. If so, write a very detailed letter answering all points. It is sadly very rare for editors to override reviewers even if they disagree with them.
5. If rejected do not spend long periods of time revising according to the comments of the reviewers which could be seen as idiosyncratic and unhelpful. Think of it as a chance to revisit the paper and improve it.
6. Send the paper to another appropriate journal but don't go "down market" in terms of prestige, impact factor etc. Set an impact factor threshold (say 2.00) and resubmit.

Studying productive authors

Thirty years ago Hartley and Branthwaite (1989) (quoted 75 times) studied eighty-eight productive psychologists who completed a questionnaire on their writing habits and on their attitudes to, and feelings about, academic writing. Their findings were most interesting: there are possible lessons for the less productive. The highly productive and published academics rarely consulted their colleagues or students about what they were writing. Also, they rarely collaborated with other colleagues but, if they did, they work on separate parts which they then put together. Third, they rarely suffered greatly from writers' blocks but, if they did have them, they tended to do something else for a while and then return.

Overall, they enjoyed academic writing; they felt that their writing was important to them; they liked expressing what they want to say; and liked developing their thoughts through writing and communicating ideas. This, no doubt, after many letters of rejection.

Studies suggest that successful authors mainly wrote in a study or office at home; they sought quiet conditions and avoid distractions whilst they were writing; they worked at any time of the day; they wrote for concentrated periods of time, of varying length, depending on what they are writing; and they spent between 2 and 5 hours writing each week in term time.

My advice is, particularly in the COVID work-from-home time is first find a workspace with minimal distractions, that makes you feel comfortable but energised. Have a daily/hourly walk/exercise that takes you away from the computer/writing desk. Set targets and measure your progress. i.e. 1000 words a day, the full analysis completed by…..; eight papers submitted a year…. Separate important and busy work: that has to be done, but out one one's control (admin, teaching). Spend at most 1/3 time on "busy" work. Stop when on a roll, not only when stuck. Stop where you can easily restart. Have a supportive academic/life partner to advise, reassure help.

Conclusion

Accept the following in the perish or publish race: It takes considerable dedication to get papers published in high impact peer-reviewed journals. It is ego-threatening work. Think of it as being an intellectual athlete training for the Olympics. This means a long, tough, training programme that never ends.

It is central to the academic cause: not an add-on, when-you-feel-like-it, promotional oriented occasional activity. If you do not like it or are not prepared to do it try another career.

It means a professional attitude rather than an "artistic temperament". Don't wait to "get in the mood". Get going: it is a manufacturing not a creative process.

Be utterly determined to do this (bloody-minded/selfish). There are rewards but it is a tough game. Be able to tolerate rejection. Practice a sort of CBT as it never changes.

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