

EDITORIAL

The sting of rejection

I love working as a scientist. In this profession one gets to do advanced laboratory experiments, interact with colleagues and students driven by a thirst for knowledge, and sometimes partake in advances with regard to understanding reality. Now, the “partaking” is of course limited (if it happens at all), but that limitation is more than softened, I think, by the fact that scientists are in the unique position to follow cutting-edge advances in our ever-broadening conceptualization of what is “out there” (and “in here”, one might add). One of the nicer developments of the last decades has been the arrival on the scene of ever-better science writers, opening up these dazzling opportunities to non-scientists as well.

So, is it all just great? Alas, no. I want to write about a common frustration, shared by many, but seldomly openly discussed. Many scientists (myself included) never completely learn how to cope with the rejection of their manuscripts. I still get that sinking feeling, even after having had my fair share of refusals (actually, whether it was “fair”, I am not in the best position to answer). Why does being rebuffed still sting? I remember an interview with the great violinist Gidon Kremer, who described his frustration at “only” being ranked third at the Belgian 1967 Queen Elisabeth Competition. It rankled because he felt he had made himself absolutely vulnerable, as the creative process required. Though many of us think that art and science have nothing to do with each other, science has many creative aspects. One such aspect we encounter in the sculpting of both text and figures before submission. Thus, it always feels personal to be turned down. This clearly comes across from a recent Nature Careers Podcast by Adam Levy.^[1] How do we then avoid going from “rejected” to “dejected”?

Let me point out that I have been author, reviewer, and occasionally even an editor, so I think I can give an honest assessment of the whole process. In practically all instances where a manuscript I (co)authored got published, the final incarnation was much better than the original, so it really pays off to try to be as tough-skinned as possible. The few instances where reviewers still got under that, lately somewhat tougher, skin were when they really seemed to be personally invested in opposing the paper. On the other side of the divide: pointing out that a method used was prone to substantial errors, got me condemned for not taking decades of experience seriously. The take-away message can be succinctly put. Reviewer: don't make it personal; author: don't take it personally. But though we are all well aware of this, most of us still carry a few rejection-scars, and I have not even opened up that other bitter

can of worms: the deafening silence some of our papers encounter after publication.

I have pointed out all this, because I think it is related to a societally dangerous “Galileo complex”, to which especially elderly scientists can be susceptible. This description is used for those who think that the outright dismissal of their ideas by “establishment science” is not an indication that they are wrong, but that they are the lone voice of reason or genius. This gives rise to the phenomenon of the retired professor of botany or geology pontificating about the dangers of vaccination in general, or mRNA-based vaccination in particular. Finally: interest and acceptance from a large audience. I often get internet links from friends and family in which highly questionable criticisms regarding the safety of the new Covid-19 vaccines are expounded. Such criticism is regularly taken much too seriously because of the academic credentials of the people involved. I often state that for every crack-pot position there is an (often older) professor who will passionately defend it. Before I am accused of ageism, I would like to point out that most academics, whether old or not, do not suffer from the Galileo complex and that one can indeed make the case that the psychological vulnerability increases with age. So, should you heed my advice of mostly just ignoring the vaccine nay-sayers? Of course, because I am not yet retired.

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REFERENCE

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