

## **Why you should never lose hope! Coping with the aftermath of manuscript rejections**

Perhaps this is not something to boast about, but I like to think that I am the current world record holder of *having the most number of rejections for one manuscript* in economics. My paper on mental risk-sharing in marriage has been rejected a mind-numbing 14 times in the last four years (and twice in a space of two days by two different journals – one rejection in the morning, resubmitted in the afternoon, and then got rejected again in the evening). Andrew Clark, a colleague of mine at the Paris School of Economics, once told me that I should keep the record going no matter what. Having my paper sent around the world and back is good for the science, he joked. But it never got that much easier for me. It doesn't matter how many times the I-think-your-paper-is-better-suited-in-another-journal (which is another way of letting you down easy) editorial letter has arrived in my inbox. Rejection always hurts.

Trying to cope with manuscript rejection is definitely not a brisk walk in the park – anyone working in academia could tell you that. After spending weeks and weeks working on your paper, polishing it, reading it a hundred times over, and then to have it thrown back at your face after months of waiting can indeed be very soul-destroying. And I should know; I've actually been through it all. Name a journal, and there's a good chance that I've already been rejected from there. Let's put it this way, if I were to print out all of the rejection letters I have ever received in my youngish career, there would probably be enough papers to cover my entire bedroom wall. Maybe even with a few to spare.

But to quote my mentor, Andrew Oswald at the University of Warwick, who was consoling me on my bad fortunes over a full plate of sashimi one London afternoon, **“You should never lose hope!”** According to Andrew, many great economists he and I know working in our field have been through a series of publishing angst themselves. Richard Easterlin’s most influential paper on happiness and income (1) couldn’t find a home in an economic journal after months of trying (it was famously rejected by the *AER* as ‘nonsense’ back in the 1970s); in the end, it was published as a book chapter. But even so, that paper has, to this date, been cited more than 800 times – an incredible feat for a book chapter. Andrew Clark, now a prominent professor in Paris, went through a phase of manuscript rejections after he completed his PhD in the 1980s. The same goes for Robert MacCulloch, a well-respected economist at Imperial College London. Even Andrew Oswald himself, arguably one of the best economists UK has to offer, had to go through (and in some regards still do go through from time to time) rejections from many double-blind reviewed journals.

“A good idea sometimes takes time to mature and to be appreciated”, he once told me. Sometimes a paper can be rejected on the basis that it is not econometrically rigorous enough, or that it is not sufficiently interesting to the general audience. But that does not mean that your idea isn’t great. The analogy to research on happiness is all too clear. In the early 1990s, Andrew Oswald, whilst still a senior research officer at the London School of Economics, organized an international conference on the then-new economics of happiness, which only a handful of people attended. “Nobody cared much for people’s happiness then”, he said. “Most economists believed that we should only care about objective things – money, inflation, unemployment. Happiness, to them, should be left to psychologists to study and not economists.” Back then, many papers written on the economics of happiness were the kind of

papers that received an outright rejection from economic journals. The field as it is viewed today is changed, of course. Now the economics of happiness, as a branch of behavioral economics, is moving towards the kind of acceptance it deserves from economists. To illustrate, a search of ECONLIT for journal articles with either 'Happiness', 'Life Satisfaction' or 'Well-being' in the title, identifies 465 published articles between 1960 and 2006. Of these 363 (78%) have been published since 1995, 285 (61%) have been published since 2000, and one-third of the literature (37%, or 173 articles) has appeared in print in just the last three years. Heck, we even have a Nobel Prize winner who is a psychologist in Daniel Kahneman!

Publishing in academic journals is also a very random process. I remember when I first started out in my academic career I was asked to referee a paper for one of the well-respected economic journals in the UK. As a first-time referee, I was so very careful to pick out all the wrong details of that paper, which led me to overlook the broad picture of what that paper is trying to paint. My extreme scrutiny led me to conclude that it should be rejected from the journal. I later found out that the paper, which was subsequently published in a lower rank journal, became very influential in the field and spurred many citations by so many well-known scholars afterwards. That's when I realized that I should not have been too hasty to judge a book by its cover, and became a lot mellower now in my judging on whether or not a paper should be rejected outright or deserves a revise and resubmit decision. An anecdote similar to this can be found in one of my conversations with Andrew Clark. I once asked him what he thinks is his most precious paper and he replied, "It's the one on satisfaction and comparison income (2). The paper was pretty badly written though as it was done in a rush. The numbers were probably all wrong too as the econometric

methods used were very elementary. It was rejected a couple of times by the top journals before eventually found its home in the *Journal of Public Economics*. But, boy, did it lead to a revolution in the field.” To date, the paper, which was published in 1996, has been cited more than 800 times in just over a decade.

I started this article thinking that maybe I should end by talking about how to try and get your paper published. But over the course of writing it I came to think, ‘Who am I to tell you that?’ I have never published in the top-5 journals (*AER*, *QJE*, *JPE*, *Econometrica*, and *Review of Economics Studies*) and probably never will. My point is that it is OK not to – sometimes great work can be judged by the way it encourages others to think in the ways that they haven’t thought before. And whenever you get a rejection, as soul-destroying as it is, try your very best not to take it personally. It will eventually find its home somewhere, and its values will be judged not by us, maybe not even by our peers, but definitely by future researchers in the field. But, of course, that doesn’t mean that you should stop aiming high. If you can get yourself published in the top-5 journals, please make sure to let me know. I’d be the first one to congratulate you!

## **Reference**

- (1) Easterlin, Richard A. 1974. “Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence” in P.A. David and M.W.Reder (eds.), *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, Academic Press, New York and London.
- (2) Clark, Andrew E., and Andrew J. Oswald. 1996. “Satisfaction and Comparison Income”, *Journal of Public Economics*, 61(3), 359-381.