Let's talk about what we don't want to talk about — How to deal with journal rejections / Parlons de ce dont nous ne voulons pas parler — Comment gérer efficacement les refus de revues

Research Webinar / Webinar de recherche

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### Thèmes / Agenda

- Overview
- Understanding the review process
- The reasons papers are rejected
- Rejections and emotions



- Dealing effectively with journal rejections
  - The emotional response
  - The practical response
- Summary
- Other issues (if time allows):
  - Appealing a rejection decision,
  - Unsuccessful strategies for dealing with rejections



### Overview of the workshop

- Rejections are a normal, common, and integral part of the scientific process
- They have a big **impact** on our performance, promotion, prestige, self-esteem, and emotions
- Despite this, we barely talk about them
- "[T]he **silence** with which we treat rejections exacerbates the situation, **thwarting** scholars' ability to respond effectively and leading them to engage in dysfunctional coping strategies" (Day, 2011)

### Overview of the workshop

- During this workshop, you will have an opportunity to express yourself and share your experience
- We will talk about issues in **general** but also go into the **specifics** of particular cases
- We will present some real-life examples

### Understanding the review process

- Dates back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was introduced at the Royal Society of London (Oldenburg, 1995)
- The process is **NOT perfect**



- The process is **VERY subjective**
- Regardless the number of review rounds, you are either IN or OUT, nothing in between.
- But the process is reasonable and logic so one can learn how to deal with it.

### Understanding the review process

- Rejections are very common and vary by the status of the journal
  - Acceptance rates in top journals: 10-14 % at *TAR* and *CAR*; 6-7% at *AOS* 
    - o 1 in 7-to-20 papers that is submitted ends up published
  - ➤ Yes, rates are higher at lower-tier journals but not by much in the second tier! Business Strategy and the Environment @ 8%

### Rejection means:

- 1. The paper has fallen short of the standards by which papers are accepted for publication in this specific journal
- 2. It often means that the review panel (the editor and 1-3 reviewers) thought it was **too much work** to bring the paper to a publishable state
- 3. Most reviewers don't want (have time) to write the paper for you!
- 4. However! Remember it is a subjective process, and the **outcome** may (and often, is) **different** with another journal/review panel!!

### A bit about the process:

- 1. The chief editor usually assigns the paper to an editor
- 2. The editor then chooses 1-3 reviewers
  - Reviewers can be from the editorial board or ad-hoc
- 3. The length of the review process varies usually completed by 3 months
- 4. The reviewers submit their reports to the editor with recommendations
- 5. But by the end of the day the decision is made by the editor
  - Can decide to reject the paper even if the reviewers recommended a resubmission



Let's dig deeper. Common weaknesses of rejected papers are:

- 1. Contributions so infamous "so what" question!
- Contributions vs. motivations
- Contributions vs. summary of findings



- The question is not "big" enough more common in top journals
- Compared with research to-date, the paper does not add enough

"Second, the incremental contribution of your study to the literature is somewhat limited to be published at CAR. There are several prior studies examining the consequences of auditor litigation and the differences in audit-quality between Big 4 and non-Big 4 auditors."

"My major concern about this paper is its contribution. From reading the ouch paper, it is not clear to me why this study is important."





#### 2. Methods

• Reviewers judge that the research methods are inadequate means for exploring the questions posed (Anna's case of studying "intuition" in audit work through interviews)

"If you want to insist on the focus on intuition and an interview-based enquiry, then it is a dead-end as far as I am concerned".

- So, it is a question of "poor" fit between the topic and the method, more than simply weaknesses in the research design, except:
  - Inappropriate interview sampling
  - Number of interviews is too low
  - Endogeneity issues

#### 3. Theory

- Evidence of poor understanding of extant literature on the topic; naïve claims about findings in prior studies
- "Wrong" theoretical frame reviewers are usually less forgiving after 2<sup>nd</sup> review round.
  - Theoretical frames are more common to qualitative papers and papers submitted to management journals
- "Limited theoretical contribution" more common for top journals
- Weak hypothesis development and rationalisation

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- 4. Research findings empirical evidence is not convincing
- Quantitative research:
  - Alternative interpretation of the results
  - The authors **overstate** their results

"I find the general question of whether and how the demand-side and supply-side of audit affect audit quality is interesting and of importance..... However, I have serious concerns about the validation of their assumption that their research setting holds the client demand effect constant. Without carefully ruling out alternative explanations and providing direct evidence on why and how the Big 4 underperform other auditors, the contribution of this study is significantly undermined."

- 4. Research findings empirical evidence is not convincing
- Qualitative research:
  - Over-interpretation of interview quotes
  - Insufficient empirical support for the arguments made in the paper
  - Empirical data confirms what we already know without adding much new insights

#### The small things that matter!

- Poor or careless writing
  - Poor writing (typos, repetitions, etc.), especially in the front end of the paper
  - The reviewer's mindset is that "if the writing is sloppy, other things may be, too!"
  - Unprofessional style (coarse, colloquial rather than academic)
- Introduction that is too long
- Effective Introduction Section is key!

#### **Contributing factors**

- Bad judgement/misunderstanding/incompetence on the part of reviewer
- Sometimes, you simply want to scream when you read the referee report or the editor letter

**Zvi:** Our paper "Audit partner ethnicity and salient audit phenomena" was published at AOS.

To identify audit partner ethnicity, we used Namsor (also used in other studies), a machine learning-based software that identifies an individual's most probable ethnicity and gender, based on the individual's first and last names.

It was rejected at *TAR* for not **validating** the database.

**Anna:** I had a paper submitted in AAAJ which was recently rejected. It used interviews as the main source of empirical data. One of the reviewers asked to provide more information on our research design, specifically the use of Python, a programming language!!!

#### Contributing factors continued – a follow up on Zvi's case

This excerpt is from the rejection letter of the TAR editor :



"For me, the paper's lack of convincing support for its variable of interest was a non-starter. In other words, because "it is essential that you validate the race/ethnicity categorization algorithm" (Reviewer 1's report) and "the accuracy of the algorithm is not clear" (Reviewer 2's report), as with the reviewers, I too was far from convinced as to the whether the paper's variable of interest accurately measures what it claims to measure"

For the next submission we hired an RA. We gave her names of 150 (450) that were identified by Namsor as ethnic minority (White)

It took her 2 days to find their photos on LinkedIn. Error rate was less than 5%.

We also asked Namsor for a list of papers that used their software and included it as appendix.

• Couldn't the editor have asked for it in an R&R?

### Rejections and emotions

Rejections can be harsh and very unpleasant to read
2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or even 4<sup>th</sup> round rejections are even more painful



- Why do we have a **negative** emotional reaction?
  - 1. Someone decided that we are not good enough stigma of a failure
  - 2. We start doubting that we might never succeed low self-esteem
  - 3. We might feel we **do not belong with the rest** the human need to belong is pervasive. A threat to our acceptance within the group
  - 4. We put a lot of work just to realize it did not pay off a waste of time
  - 5. We might not get the promotion or respect we deserve **fear**

# Dealing Effectively with Journal Rejections

### The Emotional Response

Why is it so important to deal with the emotional aspects correctly?

The wrong emotional response can have devastating consequences

Low self esteem, reduced motivation, anxiety, withdrawal and confusion The right emotional response can lead to increased focus, greater efforts, and humbleness

### The Emotional Response

• Since an initial negative emotional response is normal (Day 2011), so don't fight it!



- For how long to feel down? Depends, in part, on your rejection sensitivity.
- Remember!!! Rejections are **EXTREMELY common** and **PRACTICALLY inevitable**, for **EVERYONE**, including editors of top journals themselves!!!
- The goal should be to go back to working on the paper and its challenges relatively fast!

#### Zvi's approach

- 1. I allow myself 1-2 days of mourning and distancing myself from the paper
- 2. Then, regardless of my mood, I force myself back into it
- 3. Over the years, I have trained myself to go back to the paper faster

## Unsuccessful emotional strategies for dealing with rejections

- Social isolation
  - This is because your social network can help you turn a failure to a success
- Procrastination and avoidance
  - ➤ Problems are not going to be solved by themselves
  - To the contrary, more papers might get published, making the contribution threshold even higher.

### The Practical Response – some general comments

- Simply working hard is not enough! you can spend a thousand hours on a paper which will then still be rejected  $\otimes$ . You need to work in a smart way.
- Endurance (an ability to develop high tolerance for uncertainty and a negative emotional toll) and persistence (an ability to carry on despite adversity) are key!
- Many papers published in top-tier journals have gone through 3-4 rounds of review and, often, had been rejected by other journals. So, it is often the "keep calm and carry on" attitude that matters!
- Interestingly, the amount of effort demanded by top journals and second-tier journals are not that different. So, try high and test your luck, the higher you go, the more space you have to fall.. ©

It is very important to understand the referee report (and review process, more generally)!

- Review process is not just the only direct channel of communication with the review panel, it is also a **negotiation**!
- Although rejection means an end to negotiation, you can bring useful comments and arguments into the new review process with another journal!
- To do that, you first need to « decode » the referee report and extract what is most relevant!

• A valuable referee report is one that provides some insights into the things still **missing** in the paper and how to get it on a publication **path** 



- To be effective in dealing with a rejection, we first need to identify the **core reason(s)** why the paper was rejected
- However, unlike in the case of an R&R, there is no need to address all the referee's comments
  - No point to try and fix the past

Read all the comments thoroughly (and more than once).

Then try to classify each comment from the editor and referee report into 1 of 3 categories



#### 1. Essential/critical

- These are issues that have likely affected the referee's recommendation decision
- > If not addressed, they are likely to be raised by a referee in the next submission
- Treat these very seriously. **Most of the revision** effort should be around them.

#### 2. Nice to have (time-consuming vs. easy to address)

- These are things that **can improve** the paper
- ➤ However, they might not be issues of concern for a different referee
- ➤ Not having them is unlikely to affect the referee's recommendation decision



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- 3. Incorrect/irrelevant/destructive (and sadly, more than a few go into this category)
  - Comments with which you disagree
  - The result of misunderstanding or negligence on the reviewer's part
  - > Just **ignore** them



#### However, discerning the referee reports is easier said than done, because:

- We do not get to see all the communications editor-reviewer communications are private
  - Some important issues were communicated to the editor privately
- We don't know if both reviewers recommended a rejection, only one of them, or both suggested R&R but the editor decided otherwise.
- Reviewers do not always use a clear enough language
- Some reviewers' comments may even feel misleading
  - ➤ In one of Zvi's submissions to TAR, the Editor gave an R&R and wrote something like: "The paper is not yet ready for publication in its current state"
  - ➤ Zvi did not expect the paper would be judged as being ready in the first round ②, but he did take the comments positively, only to see the paper to be rejected in the next round

➤ It turned out those were the standard words that editors might use...!

#### How to determine which comments are essential to address?

- 1. Read the referee reports several times
- 2. Sometimes the editor report will indicate which comments are the most important <a href="Example 1">Example 1</a> <a href="Example 2">Example 2</a>
- 3. The order of the comments often reflects the order of importance, unless the report is organised to follow the paper's structure
- 4. If similar comments appear in both referee reports, they are likely to be important
- 5. Talk to experienced colleagues
  - ➤ But don't expect them to do the work for you!!!
    - Make your assessment and then ask for their opinion

- Try to address at least some comments before sending the paper to another journal also because the paper may get into the hands of the same reviewer (especially common in "smaller" fields like qualitative audit research).
- However, don't sit on the paper for too long! It does not need to be perfect! You will need all the energy for the subsequent review process!
- It may even be beneficial to leave some obvious (but not critical) weaknesses in the paper this way reviewers have something to comment on, and you something to improve for the next round!

## Unsuccessful practical strategies for dealing with rejections

- Making drastic changes totally moving to a different research topics
  - Learning curve is steep, and it will take time to produce a high-quality paper in an area you are not familiar with
- Engage in an unethical behavior
  - The morally wrong thing to do
  - ➤ But also, practically dangerous as more and more journals are asking (or requiring) the authors to share their data.

## Some concluding comments (from the perspective of both qualitative and quantitative researchers):

- In my experience, what matters most in a paper is a coherent, easy-to-follow and convincing storyline.
- Often, reviewers have broad experience but are not specialists in your exact topic. So, the objective is to write a paper in a way which makes sense even to those who don't have deep understanding of the literature, your chosen theory, or both.
- Why is your story important (motivation) and what we can learn from it (contributions) are ultimately key, the rest is the question of execution which is left for the review process.





- Rejections are painful
  - It's normal to feel bad/sad/depressed



- Understanding the root causes of the rejection are **key** for a successful revision
  - Sometimes the conclusion might be that the paper has less potential than you initially thought. This is fine.
- It takes time and experience to master this art.
- But if you do the right things, your chances in the following submission may be much higher!

### A Special case: Zvi's appeal against a rejection decision

- Should I appeal a rejection decision?
  - The appeal process varies a bit across journals
    - o Some require the equivalent of submission fees, some don't
    - It can vary as to who handles the appeal.
      - At TAR it goes directly to the chief editor; can't communicate with the editor
  - The only basis for an appeal is a significant mistake of the reviewer
    - A factual error you can demonstrate
    - Judgement issues such as whether or not there is enough contribution cannot be a basis for an appeal

### Appealing a rejection decision

- Even if the appeal is successful, if the editor wants to reject the paper, they have so much power to do this
  - o They will choose new reviewers that are likely to reject the paper
  - They can decide to reject the paper on professional ground regardless of the opinion of the reviewer
- ➤ Bottom-line, only if you strongly believe there were significant errors in the report, and absent of the errors, the paper would have received an R&R, then you can/should appeal

o I succeeded once

### Example 1

Dear Professor XXXX, The Practical Response

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to *Contemporary Accounting Research* (*CAR*). I asked two very knowledgeable researchers to review your manuscript and as you can see from their reviews, both provide very insightful comments. Unfortunately, both reviewers identify many concerns, and both recommend that the manuscript be rejected on this round.

The most important concerns, identified by both reviewers, relate to empirical design choices and measurements. These concerns lead the reviewers to question the reliability of the inferences and the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the literature. Because their concerns and comments are very clearly stated, I do not elaborate on them here.

### Example 2

Dear Professor XXXX, The Practical Response

Thank you for submitting your paper XXX to the Journal of Accounting & Economics.

I read the manuscript before reading the review to form my own independent opinion.

As you will see, while the referee finds the paper interesting, the referee has a variety of concerns that they explain well. The referee offers suggestions that should be helpful in revising the paper. The referee recommends a major revision. Based on my own reading, I am more pessimistic about the paper. I am coding this as a low probability R&R.

In addition to the referee's comments:

- 1. Have a look at Ai and Norton (2003). The abstract says: "The magnitude of the interaction effect in nonlinear models does not equal the marginal effect of the interaction term, can be of opposite sign, and its statistical significance is not calculated by standard software." I believe that this means that your interaction "CAMREPxPOST" is uninterpretable. One way to fix this is to follow Norton, Edward C., Hua Wang, and Chunrong Ai. "Computing interaction effects and standard errors in logit and probit models." The Stata Journal 4.2 (2004): 154-167. Another is to use linear probability model. Please show both approaches.
- 2. Your current diff-in-diff is based on 2 years. It would be useful to add years before and after (e.g.,2021).
- 3. Use descriptive plain English variables names not SAS names, e.g., Leverage not LEV, etc.

Because the referee found your idea interesting, I would be willing to review a new and completely re-done paper that addresses the referee's and my comments. Such a revision would be essentially a new paper and new submission. Note that there would be very high outcome risk, and it might be better to send the revision to a different journal. If you decide to send in such a revision, please include a memo describing how you responded to reviewer and to me. If I do not see sufficient improvement in the new paper, I will reject it without sending for review. Otherwise, I will send to the same reviewer.