

Academic rejection: the coping strategies of women

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Abstract

This paper offers insights into the coping strategies employed by women researchers when handling academic rejection. Female researchers identify four main coping strategies for handling the rejection of an academic paper and the failure of a funding application. The study identified common coping strategies implemented by academic women, and determines whether these strategies are consistent regardless of the type of rejection being dealt with. The research found conflicting responses from the women between their tips or suggestions to others on how to best handle rejection, and the actual coping strategies employed.

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Introduction

Rejection is a complex emotion. Amongst suggestions that it leads to alienation, isolation and shame (Vickers & Parris, 2007), are those that individuals have a lifelong irrational fear of rejection (Tools for Relationships, 1999). There are at least fifteen explanations of rejection and suggested tips to deal effectively with it. There are also suggestions to help avoid different forms of rejection. Some examples are tied to specific situations such as job loss, rejection from an internal promotion, rejection following an application to a college or university or academic paper submission (for example Vickers & Parris; Newell, 2000; Parham, 2007; Gans & Shepherd, 1994). This paper aims to determine the coping strategies of women who have experienced academic rejection, defined as either the rejection of a journal or conference paper submission and / or a request for funding.

This paper considers the coping strategies implemented by women who have experienced academic rejection, and compares their strategies with those suggested by literature. The research also considers the suggestions of these women to help others who experienced rejection. The overall research question considered is “how well do women researchers handle academic rejection?” The comparison between strategies implemented and strategies suggested offered a unique opportunity to determine if women researchers practised what they preached.

Literature review

Rejection is most commonly researched from one of two perspectives. First, the term rejection is broken down into composite pieces in an effort to understand and influence the approach towards rejection with the aim of dealing with rejection effectively (for example Lowden 1992; Vickers & Parris, 2007). Second, rejection is presented as a given response and the research focuses on suggesting tips to deal with the rejection (e.g., Clutter, 1993; Fetzer, 2004; Newell, 2000). The literature seeks to explain different forms of rejection such as social rejection (Berk, 1997) and fear of rejection (Tools for Relationships, 1999) which are both researched from the first perspective.

From an academic standpoint, there is limited research into the area of rejection, either as a term to be broken down or investigated or a set of tips for surviving it. However, there has been some work on rejection presented within the larger field of authorship, for example, explaining what editors might look for and how to seek publishing contracts and avoid the rejection of books or book submissions (e.g., Jones, 2003; Fetzer, 2004; Newell, 2000). One commonality across the literature is the advice not to take rejection personally (e.g., Parham, 2007; Fetzer). Rejection is a complex emotion. Amongst suggestions that it leads to alienation, isolation and shame (Vickers & Parris, 2007), are those that individuals have a lifelong irrational fear of rejection (Tools for Relationships, 1999). There are at least fifteen explanations of rejection and suggested tips to deal effectively with it.

Approach 1: Rejection as a process

Literature exists on rejection in the form of self help modules available for dealing with it and articles seeking to explain and break down the emotion to maximise understanding on the topic. Lists of coping strategies and advices exist on how to handle rejection and tips, motivations and advice on how to handle it. Some authors (Tools for Relationships, 1999) suggest that rejection can exist in the form of an irrational fear, shaping and altering behaviours, attitudes and actions. One author describes the term rejection simply as someone saying “no” to an idea, request or action (Self Help, 2006). This author suggests different approaches to rejection by classifying individuals into two categories depending on their reaction and how they handle the rejection. The first category is those individuals who accept the rejection as a denial of the situation without taking it personally, the author refers to this person as “assertive.” The second category is those who seek the approval of others and the rejection increases their vulnerability, these people therefore take rejection personally.

Coping strategies

Berk (1997) offers an insight into social rejection which the author suggest exists in different forms and intensities and affects social interactions. A relationship is suggested (Fielden & Davidson, 1998) between rejection and social problems such as self-esteem, stress and social acceptance. When dealing with social rejection, individuals employ similar coping strategies regardless of whether the social rejection experienced is major or minor and these strategies are all drawn from the same pool of coping mechanisms (Berk). The author goes on to present the coping strategy of a behaviour of “saving face” which is exerted as a result of rejection. This strategy is employed to try to prevent stigma and damages to a person’s worth or ego. Berk applies this face saving coping mechanism to social rejection; however, there are suggestions that rejection, regardless of its form, attracts consistent coping strategies. From this, it can be inferred that each individual has a

resource of coping strategies and these strategies will be drawn upon and employed regardless of the form of rejection. For example an individual, who handles the rejection from asking someone out on a date in a particular negative way, is likely to implement this particular negative approach when dealing with the rejection of an academic paper submission.

It is consistently emphasised throughout the literature not to take the rejection personally, regardless of the situation. It has been suggested (Self Help, 2006) that individuals who take rejection personally increase the risk of non-constructive conflict and complicate their ability to communicate effectively and objectively understand a situation. The literature (Counselor's Connection, 2007) states that by dealing with rejection positively and not taking it personally enables us to learn and improve and even goes so far as to suggest rejection is a positive occurrence making us aware of areas that need perfecting that we may otherwise be unaware of. In handling rejection in this way, an individual is able to accept the rejection and look at the situation positively thereby gaining an advantageous experience.

Support from others is a frequently referenced coping strategy for dealing with rejection across the literature. Counselor's Connection (2007) offers advice to those within a support network or group for a person dealing with rejection. This advice includes activities such as listening and letting the rejected person vent their frustration and disappointment and encouraging and motivating them to recover and accept the rejection and deal with it positively. The literature (Fielden & Davidson, 1998) emphasises the importance of social support being available to unemployed females to ensure their wellbeing when dealing with the rejection experienced when faced with unemployment. This rejection is derived from the fact that employment acts as a form of social support to women, therefore the loss of employment leads to feelings of rejection. This literature has identified three main groups or networks where women seek social support. These groups are friends, family and colleagues. Fielden and Davidson (1998) identify previous research that has shown social support is important to women dealing with rejection, particularly emotional support. The authors suggest women seek social support from family and friends as these networks aid women in reducing the rejection they are experiencing. Throughout the literature social support has been identified as an essential coping mechanism when rejection is experienced. The importance of support being available to women emphasises the critical role that family, friends, colleagues, mentors, and other support groups play when a woman is experiencing rejection. In order to accept the rejection and deal with it positively women need to feel comfortable enough to approach and accept the support offered by these groups.

Clutter (1993) outlines several advices to nurses who have been rejected from an internal promotion. Talking to the decision makers of the rejection, or seeking feedback is a positive coping mechanism identified. Clutter suggests nurses experiencing rejection should approach the decision makers and let them know how they feel, ask them to reconsider and if rejection remains as the outcome, they should seek feedback for future reference. Clutter then goes on to suggest seeking further action and encourages nurses not to be intimidated by people's titles. This advice, however, suggests that one does not accept rejection, which the literature identifies as a negative approach to dealing with rejection (Counselor's Connection, 2007). On the other hand, Fetzer (2004) acknowledges that negative reviews can be difficult, however states that initial emotional responses must be set aside before confronting decision makers. Fetzer states that tact is needed when approaching reviewers and reinforces that reviewers are in a position of power and approaching them positively, rather than negatively will increase the benefits

related to the situation. Across the academic literature are consistent suggestions for seeking feedback following rejection. It is stated (Counselor's Connection) that this is a coping strategy employed to deal with the rejection by facing it and addressing it with the hope of avoiding such a rejection in the future. However although seeking feedback has been identified as a positive approach to handling rejection, the wrong attitude when seeking this feedback increases likelihood of conflict and decreases the likelihood of handling the situation positively.

Approach 2: Tips for dealing with rejection

Tips for academics

With regards to academic rejection (being rejection from a paper submission or request for grant or funding), little literature exists on how to handle and approach this form of rejection. However the majority of the literature aims to provide tips on how to write papers for academic submission in order to avoid rejection – perhaps a more positive approach by academics? These articles contain a certain motivation in the style of writing and urge academics not to give up and to continue pursuing their academic goals. Much of this literature is written from the editors' perspective, providing steps for the authors to take to increase the likelihood of acceptance of their paper, maintaining positive motivations to get through rejection and encouraging prospective authors to submit papers for publishing.

Common tips mentioned throughout the literature to authors include targeting the paper to the journal; having an adequate and thorough literature review; (Jones, 2003); know the submission and review process; knowledge of the market (Newell, 2000); knowledge of the audience (readers of the journal); and never assume prior knowledge (Student BMJ, 2007). The literature motivates readers by reinforcing that they focus on the rewards and the “thrill” of successfully submitting an academic paper (Newell).

Another side of the literature provides guidelines for actually writing academic papers for submission. These guidelines include the preparation of a thorough outline for the paper and then filling in each element of the outline (Newell, 2000). Other processes mentioned include setting goals for interim achievement and then rewarding self for these achievements. Such goals may include word limits per writing sessions, or the completion of a certain number of elements within the outline of the paper (Newell).

The literature for academic submissions acknowledges that the fear of rejection is a possibility for authors (Newell, 2000). Rejection is a learning process and most people who write as part of their job have many rejection letters and papers that never get published (Newell). Newell also suggests having a back up plan such as other possible journals to submit the paper to and a plan of what to write about next and where to submit it. Student BMJ (2007) also suggests the rejection of an academic submission is a learning process and getting it right takes practice. Therefore feedback should be accepted constructively by looking at what the reviewers have done and why they've done it. Jones (2003) suggests the possibility that another journal may take a different view on the paper.

As a result of this literature review, rejection as a concept has been thoroughly discussed, identifying different forms and intensities of rejection including social rejection, life rejection and rejection as a form or part of fear, including fear of

failure. The three main coping strategies of not taking the rejection personally, seeking support from support groups, and obtaining feedback were identified along with the different approaches for implementing these strategies.

Previous research suggests some differentiation between social or life rejection and academic rejection. Because of this distinction, and the paper's focus on academic rejection, significant literature was also produced on tips for academics submitting a paper to a journal with ideas to minimise the possibility of rejection. These articles made reference to rejection as a possibility and offered thoughts of encouragement to readers to motivate them to pursue their academic goals. The authors offered rejection as a learning process available to prospective writers as an opportunity for them to improve their writing and communication skills.

Methodology

An online, self-administered survey was used to facilitate this research with the aim of providing an insight into the internal and external influencers of women researchers at Central Queensland University. This distribution method was deemed most effective due to the time restraints of the research and it was considered to be most effective in reaching the sample population. The survey was sent by email to participants within an organisation which reduced and overcame the common online survey errors of multiple submission, bogus respondents and responses and population misrepresentation (all members of the organisation had ready access to their email) (Burns & Bush, 2006). A follow up email was sent through to the population to encourage them to complete the survey with the aim of decreasing non-response rates.

The population to whom the survey was dispersed consisted of women researchers at Central Queensland University regional campuses being Rockhampton, Gladstone, Mackay, Bundaberg and Emerald. For the purpose of this study a women researcher is any female conducting research at any of the above mentioned campuses being a postgraduate research student, an academic researcher, a postdoctoral fellow, general staff member or an external researcher linked to the university. Access to this sample was gained through either the Women in Research Central Queensland University email database, the CQU research-student email list or through email correspondence with the Associate Dean of Research Secretaries for dispersion to women researchers within each of the university's Faculties. It was necessary to limit the study to female respondents due to restrictions on time, the conditions attached to funding and access to researchers through the networks mentioned above.

The survey was administered by inviting the target population to participate via email. This email contained an introductory letter which outlined the research objectives and aims and emphasised the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant's responses. The email also contained the actual URL link to the survey which was password privilege accessible.

The researchers estimated that a minimum of 200 women were invited to participate in the study which attracted a 36% response rate. Therefore 73 responses were received (one being a double response and subsequently deleted) leaving 72 responses included in the analysis of the results. As the sample size exceeds 30, this study can be considered as large and the response rate significant of the sample size (Burns & Bush, 2006).

Prior to the distribution of the online survey, a pilot study was conducted on a random sample of the population across two of the regional campuses. This pilot test was conducted with the aim of determining any errors with regards to causes of response and non-response bias through question ambiguity, survey layout and design, exhaustiveness of response categories, length of survey and ease of administration. As a result of this pilot test several modifications were made to the survey. Respondents were also provided with the opportunity to provide feedback and to offer suggestions at the conclusion of the survey.

The distributed survey contained fixed limited response and open ended questions which were found across eight sections of the survey. The eight sections contained questions relating to demographics (gender, age, income and family); demographics (employment and study); the research of the respondents; the research effectiveness of respondents; research output; rejection; respondents research career; and any final thoughts of respondents. For the purpose of this study responses from the section concerning rejection will be our main consideration.

Results and discussion

From the women researchers surveyed, 8.5% reported that their conference paper had been rejected, 19.7% reported they had a journal submission rejected, 30.9% reported they had been rejected in their application for a grant, 16.9% reported they had been rejected from both a paper and a grant application and 43.6% of the total population had experienced ‘academic rejection.’ This percentage of women who have experienced academic rejection represents a significant number of the population.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who experienced rejection

Rejection experienced	Percentage of respondents
Funding application	30.9%
Journal	19.7%
Paper and funding application	16.9%
Conference paper	8.5%
Conference paper & journal	1.5%
Total academic rejection	43.6%

Source: developed from the research

The results from the questionnaire identified four main coping strategies employed by academic women when faced with rejection. These four coping strategies were identified through an open-ended question which asked women respondents to comment on how they felt about the rejection they had experienced. The results were then coded and four main coping strategies emerged:

1. Feeling bad – attributed to self;
2. Feeling bad – attributed to others;
3. Feeling bad – but positive about the future;
4. Feeling positive and not taking it personally.

Coping strategy 1: Feeling bad and it’s my fault

Coping strategy 1 saw respondents internalising the rejection experienced by attributing blame to self and often taking the rejection personally. As discussed in

the literature, this response has been identified as negative and categorised by increasing the individual's vulnerability leading to a negative approach (Self Help, 2006). Therefore the rejection is taken personally. Comments which typified coping strategy 1 included expressions of worthlessness and stupidity, disappointment, anger, insecurity and loss of confidence.

Coping strategy 2: Feeling bad and it's your fault

Women researchers who demonstrated this coping strategy blamed others and made negative comments about their supervisors, group members, referee reports and the editor of the journal. These responses included comments signalling feelings of dismissal because of being female (minority group), bias on behalf of the editor, neglect from supervisor/s and disappointment in the lack of group commitment.

Coping strategy 3: Feeling bad but positive about the future

Coping strategy 3 saw respondents handle the rejection with conflicting emotions. The initial response to the rejection was negative indicated by comments including disappointment, feeling upset, rotten and downhearted. However respondents indicated a positive outlook on the future despite the initial negative response. The positive outlook was identified with comments following these initial negative ones such as a realisation that the feeling was part of the learning curve, feeling pragmatic, moving on, understanding, and getting over it. This positive outlook and the ability of the respondents to accept the rejection leads to the identification of coping strategy 3 as a positive coping strategy for women to employ.

Coping strategy 4: Feeling positive and not taking the rejection personally

Coping strategy 4 relates directly to the literature identified as an effective and desirable approach to handling rejection. Coping strategy 4 saw women employ positive and effective coping mechanisms which identify this strategy as positive and most preferred for women to employ. This response saw the tip of not taking the rejection personally consistently identified throughout the literature and implemented by women when handling rejection. Coping strategy 4 was identified through comments such as feeling fine and realising it's what research is about, accepting it as a learning process, rewriting and resubmitting the paper, accepting the reviewer's comments and feedback, and acknowledging why the paper was rejected.

Table 2: Coping strategies employed by women rejected from a journal or conference paper submission

Coping strategy employed	Percentage of respondents
1. Feeling bad – attributed to self	38%
2. Feeling bad – attributed to others	19.05%
3. Feeling bad – positive future	19.05%
4. Feeling positive and not taking it personally	23.81%

Source: developed from the research

Table 3: Coping strategies employed by women rejected from a funding or grant submission

Coping strategy employed	Percentage of respondents
1. Feeling bad – attributed to self	36.36%
2. Feeling bad – attributed to others	9.09%
3. Feeling bad – positive future	13.64%
4. Feeling positive and not taking it personally	40.91%

Source: developed from the research

When compiling the results of the responses into each of these four categories between the women who had a journal or conference paper rejected and women who were rejected by a funding application the results significantly mirrored each other. The majority of the responses from paper and funding rejection were classified into either coping strategy one or coping strategy four, which appear to be at either end of the scales. However although coping strategies two and three attracted a less significant response, the cumulative total percentage from categories one, two and three (each being negative initial responses, taking the rejection personally) amounted to a larger percentage of responses than that of category four. Therefore, women who were dealing with academic rejection were more likely to take the rejection personally than to deal with it positively; however, the negative approaches, or way the women dealt with it (coping mechanisms as mentioned previously) varied.

Advice on dealing with rejection

Respondents were also asked to rank their top three tips to new researchers for dealing with rejection.

Table 4: Most common suggested tips for dealing with rejection

Suggestion	Percentage of respondents
1. Don't take it personally	29.3%
2. Try again	24.4%
3. Discuss with others	14.6%
4. Treat as a learning experience	12.2%

Source: developed from the research

When considering these tips, consistencies can be noted with the three common coping strategies identified in the literature. Discussing with others indicates turning to a support group to deal with the rejection (Fielden & Davidson, 1998). Trying again and treating the rejection as a learning experience can be linked to the coping strategy and approaches concerning seeking feedback (Fetzer, 2004), and

not taking the rejection personally is the third coping strategy identified in the literature (Counselor’s Connection, 2007).

Considering these responses and the significant literature sighted on the importance of support groups in society for women dealing with rejection, the responses from the respondents who were members of the ‘women in research’ group were considered. The survey identified that 74.6% of respondents were a member of the group, and these women indicated they were members either for research networking or for social networking which shows a community of support amongst the group. This significant number of the population involved in the group may mirror the target population and the presence in the population of ‘women in research’. However, this group is identified as a support group available to its members. The top three tips emerged as:

Table 5: ‘Women in research’ suggestions for dealing with rejection

Suggestion	Percentage of respondents
1. Don’t take it personally	32.3%
2. Discuss with others	19.4%
3. Try again	19.4%

Source: developed from the research

These results are consistent with and mirror the responses of the population. The only noticeable difference between these tips provided by women in research and that of the population was an increase in the percentage of responses to the ‘discuss with others’ tip. ‘Discuss with others’ linked to support groups from the literature (Fielden & Davidson, 1998) attracted a higher response from ‘women in research’ than that of the population. This emphasises the importance of support groups being available to women (such as ‘women in research’) and women acknowledging this as an effective coping strategy.

From the responses to the survey, a conflicting difference is noted between the strategies actually implemented by women when dealing with rejection, and the women’s advices on effective ways to handle rejection. It appears that women are more likely to handle rejection negatively than implement a desired response; however, when offering advices to other women, the most consistent response was to ‘not take it personally.’ These results indicate that women acknowledge they tell others not to take rejection personally; however, they are less likely to implement this coping strategy themselves when actually handling rejection.

Coping strategies and effective research

Past research has identified three effective research tips (Dobele & Hafey, 2003) and these tips were matched with the tips offered by respondents who handled the rejection negatively, results from comparing research tips and negatively handling rejection are presented in Table 6.

These results identify that women who handled the rejection badly or negatively, did so regardless of whether they had a mentor (56.25% with a mentor compared with 43.75% who did not have a mentor). Furthermore, approximately one third of women who responded negatively to rejection did so regardless of their advice on time management and having a passion for the field of research in which they are involved.

Thus, the respondents are able to identify tips they believe, or have proven, with help researcher effectiveness but are, perhaps, unable to implement these in order to deal with the rejection positively or more effectively.

Table 6: Rejection handled negatively matched with tips

Rejection handled negatively	
Tip	Percentage of responses
Mentor	Yes: 56.25% No: 43.75%
Recommend time management	Yes: 35.29% No: 64.71%
Recommend having a passion	Yes: 35.29% No: 64.71%

Source: Developed from the research.

Coping strategies and theory

Relating the responses of the women researchers back to the academic literature, it has been identified that handling rejection positively is the most effective coping strategy. Women researchers either implemented or acknowledged the effectiveness of not taking the rejection personally. Strategies one and two identified negative outlooks and approaches to the rejection. Therefore, in order not to take rejection personally, coping strategies three and four are the most desired strategies. Coping strategy three is identified as a desired coping strategy as the long term outlook of the strategy is positive, despite initial negative responses. The responses of the women who implemented this strategy recognised the rejection as a learning experience and were able to accept the rejection and implement a positive outlook. Although coping strategy three is identified as a desired strategy, coping strategy four remains the preferred coping strategy as it displays both a short and long term positive approach.

Conclusions

The literature identified and the results of the survey have provided an insight into the actual and desired coping strategies of women when handling rejection. Rejection was defined as a concept which exists in different forms such as social rejection (Berk, 1997) and in different intensities such as rejection as a fear (Tools for Relationships, 1999). Rejection has been related to feelings such as alienation, self-esteem and isolation (Vickers & Parries, 2007) and certain behaviours such as those relating to social interactions (Berk). Rejection is as an emotion existing in different intensities.

It was identified that when dealing with rejection, regardless of its form or intensity, we draw our coping strategies from the same pool of coping mechanisms (Berk, 1997). Therefore consistencies should be noted amongst the coping strategies implemented by different individuals when dealing with and coping with a diverse range of rejections. The coping strategies identified in the literature were 'saving face' behaviour (Berk), support groups (Fielden & Davidson, 1998), seeking feedback (Fetzer, 2004) and not taking the rejection personally (Counselor's Connection, 2007). Particular emphasis was placed on support groups, seeking feedback and not taking rejection personally.

The results from the survey found consistencies relating back to the literature. These results identified women to believe the three main coping strategies identified in the literature to be most effective when dealing with rejection. However, these approaches and attitudes to rejection were less likely to be implemented when it actually came to experiencing rejection. Therefore

respondents were more likely to offer good suggestions for coping with rejection than actually to follow those suggestions themselves.

Women were found to deal with rejection in one of four ways, three of these being negative responses, and one being positive. Two coping strategies were identified as desired coping strategies as both had a positive outlook despite one having initial negative responses (coping strategy 3). Women were more likely to handle rejection negatively, rather than positively, despite their obvious awareness that handling it positively would lead to more beneficial results.

An area for future research involves determining whether as the rejection an individual experiences increases, if the coping strategies actually employed continue to become more effective. For example, is an individual able to progress through each of the four coping strategies identified to the preferred coping strategy (coping strategy 4) as more rejection is experienced? Or despite an acknowledgement that handling rejection positively and not taking it personally is the most effective coping strategy, negative ones continue to be implemented. The questionnaire conducted to facilitate this research could also be replicated across a wider sample, and could also consider the responses of men. This would allow a study to be conducted to determine any consistencies or differences between the responses of males and those of females towards handling rejection.

The consensus on the outlook of rejection was to treat it as a learning experience by viewing the situation objectively. Seeking feedback, support groups and not taking it personally are all strategies that see rejection dealt with positively. Learning from the experience means that mistakes will be corrected and hopefully not made again. With rejection, it appears that what women do and what they say appears to be at extreme ends of the scales. A focus needs to be on handling rejection positively as it is clear there is a consensus this is the most beneficial approach.

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