Just Begin Again: Addressing a Panel to which the Question Was Put, How to Deal with Failure.

I'm going to be talking about how to deal with professional setbacks, a nice euphemism for failures. Let me start by talking about setbacks in the process of writing an article. Sometimes you are working on an analysis, and you realize that the data are ambiguous. They could well have a different, totally trivial, interpretation you can't rule out. Were this the case, your own theoretical argument would fall to the ground in pieces. You could easily spend a great deal of time tearing into the guts of everything, but trust me—don't ask questions the answers to which you don't want to hear. What you should do is simply present *your* way of seeing things—that's as good as anyone else's. Sociology is telling stories, and assembling support that satisfies the criteria that the discipline has established. You're not responsible for choosing the rules, only playing the game **within** the rules.

Of course, there are times when a reviewer will notice a real problem—although more commonly, they'll **invent** a problem, the problem being, that they would like you to say something different from what you found, or thought you found, or just what **you** want to say. Then what do you do? Science is a collective enterprise, and the reason there are reviewers is so that the collective wisdom can be in each of your articles. You need to compromise. Whatever that reviewer's perspective is, move halfway there. See if you can assemble support to stop up the holes that may have been poked in your own argument, while getting the reviewer on your side by seeming more like an ally, and less like a threat.

Unfortunately, sometimes you don't get this chance—you get a flat out rejection, or a series of rejections, such that you can't salvage the work. Then what? Pass it on. When you can't pull yourself up, push someone else down. Are you reviewing the paper of a likely peer and competitor, the kind of person who might have rejected yours? Coming right back atcha. At least the playing field is even again.

If this is the kind of person you want to be, and the kind of life you want to live, you're in luck, because this is exactly what our current system tends to produce. The only problem with this is

that it encourages us to be liars instead of scientists, and to be the kind of shitheels who are detested by all wholesome living creatures.

The most important thing I have to say is that the key to dealing with failures is to understand what success is. Success has to do with you as a human being and a human life, not with getting an article accepted, a job, or whatever. I've seen a lot of people you might think were successes who were pretty miserable; they were warped inside for so long that, when they finally died alone, scorned by those who once pretended to respect them, knowing that their life had been devoted to producing so much straw, they were so twisted they couldn't get them into a coffin. On the other hand, I've known many people who didn't take the usual academic path who are flourishing, not only financially and emotionally, but intellectually. It will profit you not if you gain the whole world and lose your soul.

You may think this is easy for me to say and so you should ignore this. I'm not saying this because I came out all right, basically; I'm saying this because I've gotten to see plenty who didn't. I do have things that I think are important for dealing with failure—and believe me, I have had more than my share—but they're not guaranteed to work. The reason being, you simply don't have complete control of these things. But you do have control of your own actions. So let's make sure you don't mess up what you **do** have control over because you're trying to master something you don't.

With the crisis of academia, this is **more** important, not less so. Once upon a time, you could figure out what kind of crap you might have to do in order to have two publications in four years. Now you can do all that and have nothing, because papers take so long to work their way through a pipeline. Compromising doesn't pay out any more. Being goal directed doesn't always work. It's mostly out of your hands, and in the hands of an ill-coordinated set of overworked decent people, half-trained monkeys, and Stalinist thugs.

You need to replace the idea of failure (which is an unambiguous thing *you* did) with rejection (about an evaluative relationship). And that's because most rejections aren't very informative about your quality. Of course, sometimes it really is that you, or your work, stinks. And

sometimes it really is that the other fellow is a dipshit. But most of the time, it's more like a 1970s relationship: There ain't no good guy, there ain't no bad guy, there's only you and me and we just disagree. One journal rejects and the other accepts. There's no recipe that will help you avoid rejection. Expect it, at least some times. Then what do you do? Begin again.

My title is serious, though it's taken from an awesome Spinal Tap song. The big thing is beginning again— standing up and dusting yourself off after you've been knocked down, but also starting new things. At Wisconsin, Bob Hauser was so successful at getting grants, that now Hauser is in the Webster's dictionary as a verb—to Hauser up money. What was the secret he passed on to grad students? Apply a lot, don't worry about getting rejected. He got turned down all the time. His success ratio wasn't all that high, he said; what was high was the denominator.

This is increasingly true for getting a job. These days, it's mostly about attrition. The jobs go to those who stick around year after year and keep trying. There's no shame in it (the way there was when I was leaving grad school, and didn't get a single interview my first year—and almost threw in the towel).[1] People go to a holding position. The discipline is basically waiting to see who chickens out and who keeps on plugging away.

All that is maybe obvious. But what isn't obvious about the Just Begin Again thing is that you need to know when to walk away from a project. Someone compared this to burnt toast. You burn the toast, and you can walk over to the sink and scrape and scrape away at it, crumbs flying everywhere…but sometimes it just makes sense to put in a new slice. The biggest mistake I see young scholars making is a determination to get **something** out of a flawed project, when they've actually now learned how to do things **right**. It often isn't about what you **get** out of a project, but **that** you get out. Pay tribute to that work by letting it die in peace, and go on to do something really solid. And solid isn't the same thing as easy.

You know enough sociology to understand collective action problems, right? Well, we're stuck in one right now. It's in each person's individual interest to write a lot of articles that look cool

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[1]. This is true, and you can ask my advisor, since she is in the room. See if she remembers asking me, when I was finishing up and trying to get a job, why I hadn't approached her to say hi at the ASA, and I told her I thought I had the stench of career death and didn't want to contaminate her.

and make a strong argument. As a result, sociology is becoming the science of easy problems, irreproducible results, and overgeneralization. That means it's hard to explain why it shouldn't just be shut down. I bet the last tenured astrologist wasn't as happy with his life as he thought he'd be.

It sucks that journals have a crazy positive publication bias, that they have a passion for novelty over replication, and that reviewers increasingly focus on kibitzing about "framing" as opposed to actually evaluating a manuscript. But I increasingly hear murmurs of protest and sense that there may be a change in the works. In part because of the incredible crisis of oversupply that we have, we can dramatically **increase** our standards instead of lowering them as we've been doing. I don't know how long we'll allow people to publish any pabulum that has a citation to Weber and three asterisks. So I'm going to focus on strategies for dealing with failure that will work in a **good** world, not just in a corrupt one.

First, 'fess up. The thing of denying the limitations in your work just isn't right. Put them front and center, explain why nothing can be done about it (because if it could, you would have done it), and why we still need work like yours. If in doing this you realize we **don't** need it, then pack up and move to a study we **do**. Will you be disadvantaged over the people who hide their weaknesses? Maybe. But in a head-to-head, you have nothing to lose, while the person with a three of diamonds in the hole will have to fold.

Second, learn how to appreciate critical reviewers. Often when I get critical reviews back; actually make that **always**, I first simply want to go Amy Bishop on them. Thank god for gun control. But as I cool down, I usually find that one third of the critical reviewers are really on to something—they may be wrong, but I set up their misunderstanding. Another third were basically unqualified to make a determination, but did their best and put some serious time into trying. And then one third are actually paranoid jerks who actually **do** deserve to have their asses kicked, but most editors get that from reading their reviews just like you do. When I get a reviewer saying the problem is you should have done X, Y and Z my first impulse is to come up with reasons why that's a stupid idea. But my second is to do X, my third to do Y and my fourth to do Z, if they're possible. Every now and then even a hostile reviewer who thinks he's sending

you out to clean the Aegean stables is actually handing you the chance to do a real breakthrough. Don't be defensive. Be expansive. Don't leave your **goals** behind—don't do what someone **else** wants you to do—but do take challenges seriously and meet them **empirically**, not **rhetorically**.

Third, be your own worst critic. I was just giving a talk somewhere at two places, where I asked as an exercise, who in the audience could figure out the reason for possible spuriousness in what I was presenting. No one could, so I told them. Behind every analysis I do are dozens and dozens of robustness checks, and yet reviewers can still suggest things I never thought of, for which I am grateful. And the things that turn out to be impossible to dismiss are probably things we should all be thinking about. Not sweeping under the rug.

Fourth, don't overthink things. When you are a graduate student, you have no idea what is really going on behind closed doors, and so you do typical conspiracy thinking, trying to guess who the reviewer was (almost always, your guess is someone you know of, while the actual reviewer is someone obscure like you), and you try to come up with **reasons** why this person did this cruel thing to you. Don't waste your time. You're not going to be right, and the thing is, fix the problems if you can, be clearer if there were no problems in the first place, and take it some place else if you have to. When you are a tenured faculty member, you **also** have no idea what is really going on behind closed doors, but you don't care. And so you are more efficient.

But also, don't put your mind where it doesn't belong, namely in other people's heads. You don't know why they do what they do. I'm saying two things: first, you don't control other people's actions, which means you don't control your own fate. Further, God deliberately chose to make a world in which if you do the right thing, there's no reason to think you'll be met with acclaim and reward. Sorry, but that's the way it is in **all** spheres of life. Second, I am saying that you shouldn't blame others, because from here on, it's about what **you're** going to do, and if you, and the people who really know you, will think you worthy of respect.

Sociology is a science with a lot of failures and screw ups in it. Our founder, Comte, never had a proper job, and was basically insane, as was Max Weber, who lived off his wife's money as opposed to holding down a regular job. Simmel never had a regular position, and I have it on

good authority that Albion Small had to supplement his income by playing the washboard in a jug band. If you're afraid of failure, you're not ready to be a real scientist. Seriously. Look at the once-born types who've never had failure because they've greased their articles with Crisco and rammed them up the ASR. You know what's worse than not getting an award, or not being on Oprah? It's about getting that award or being on Oprah for shit that is not right. Even if no one exposes you, you know in your heart and you feel self-hatred. People who are terrified of failure can't issue a correction to their own work; they can't admit that they were wrong and resolve to try to do better in the future.

In sum, in sociology right now, academia isn't success driven. That would be good—if we were all being selected for actually succeeding at what we do. Rather, rewards have been decoupled from success and have gone to forgers and phonies, hacks and quacks. Don't let that be you. It isn't worth it, and anyway, I think the days of non-exposure may be ending.