

The breeding of researchers

Fabio Paglieri

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Like organisms filling a niche, postdocs need to adapt to their ecosystems if they want to survive and thrive. The qualities of the best among us depend in part on the pressures exerted by the academic system. But are these ecological pressures more likely to breed useful creatures or creepy monsters?

Every postdoc is required to learn (and never publicly mention) five basic survival tactics: get your results published as fast as you can; orient your research activity towards well-funded areas linked to excellent labs with good resources; don't bother attempting to publish negative findings; focus your attention on trendy topics; and try to gather counter-intuitive findings. Many supervisors — those with the most integrity, at least — would probably downplay these suggestions and advise postdocs to avoid them. But any such noble effort is doomed to fail, as long as conforming to these strategies offers an advantage to postdocs fighting for jobs. As in most environments the ecological pressures of academic science inevitably trump good intentions.

These five tactics, however, do have repercussions. Eagerness to publish often leads to inaccuracy, and invites the fragmenting of a big piece of complex research into smaller, easier-to-sell mini-projects that may be less coherent. When funding opportunities rule research priorities, researchers become vulnerable to political and financial influences, which may jeopardize ethical integrity and the quality of the science. Downplaying negative findings could hide a situation in which positive findings cannot be reproduced across different labs, and insisting on trendy topics marginalizes robust results that lack the required 'wow effect'.

Given the dangers, why does academia continue to promote these survival tactics? Could it be — to paraphrase the late British politician Winston Churchill — that the method is the worst form of postdoc training apart from all the others? I don't have the answer — and, because it's not a suitable topic for high-profile publication, I may never have time to look for one.

Author information

Affiliations

Fabio Paglieri is a postdoc in cognitive psychology at the Institute for Cognitive Science and Technologies of the National Research Council in Rome.

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