

Fahrenheit 451: How Hot is Your Research?

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To the Editor:

In the April 2007 issue of the *Observer*, Zacks and Maley discuss some interesting citation statistics and alternatives to quantifying how hot research topics are in the article “What’s Hot in Psychology?” Many young researchers would probably want to study a hot topic, and at first glance this seems like a reasonable justification for the exercise. The authors conclude with the following advice for young investigators: Look for topics with few articles and many citations.

I found this advice quite preposterous. Impact factors and other such indices may be of great interest to those assessing our case for promotion, but they are of little value for choosing the next research question. For the benefit of any young investigator who may have taken the advice seriously, I decided to respond.

The authors admit that there are probably many confounding factors, but the problem is much more fundamental than how these numbers may be biased. First, people’s interests are not determined by numbers. If I am interested in visual cognition, I may be persuaded to look at multisensory integration, but even a million citations won’t make me study cross-cultural psychology or molecular biology for that matter. Additionally, zooming in on a research area is a long way from coming up with an interesting and worthwhile research question.

I don’t see myself advising any students or beginning academics to look up citation figures. Instead, I would encourage them to broaden their horizons — read and attend seminars, workshops, and conferences. The knowledge gained will not only help spot hot topics in a more naturalistic way, but will also identify gaps in your knowledge and yield specific worthwhile hypotheses. I would also encourage students to follow their interests. Surely, many of us wouldn’t be thinking about research over the weekend if we didn’t find the questions interesting.

Finally, there is the money trail. Perhaps a more useful exercise is looking up which areas are highlighted by funding agencies as priorities. Another is thinking what problems society will face tomorrow and where further research could help. Given that citations can take a few years to accumulate, this might be a better way of estimating which topics will be hot in three years.

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