

Observer Forum

August 14, 2011

Vita Revisited

I plan to give the Presidential Column “Vita Voyeur” [*Observer*, January 2004] to my graduate students and post docs, who will greatly benefit from the thoughtful suggestions of an experienced insider. I even revised my own vita in response to one point: no more grouping publications by type!

However, I was concerned that the focus on how to *construct* a vita, juxtaposed with examples from three distinguished scientists who happen to have *massive* vitas, might reinforce the idea that success in our field is related to the sheer *quantity* of one’s output. Of course, the unquestionable depth and significance of the contributions of Henry Roediger, Susan Fiske, and Robert Sternberg are not the issue here. And the column was not about how to evaluate research. Still, how about putting in a word for quality?

My concern about conflating quantity and quality is reinforced by a couple of other observations. First, if you’re in the field long enough, you eventually realize there are people with vast numbers of publications that are rarely if ever cited. Looking at the science citation index can be a discouraging experience: so many papers cited so few times! (Perhaps due to the informational overload Roediger discussed in an earlier column.)

Individuals don’t make the “most highly cited” list in psychology because they have published a vast number of articles, each of which is cited a few times; they make it because of a smaller number of highly significant papers, the ones that launch a thousand ships, i.e., studies that turn into other journal articles.

Also, there are areas where one might argue that *too many* articles get published. That progress would be promoted by raising the quality bar and publishing fewer studies with more reliable results.

I don’t see a simple solution here. Younger people certainly have to publish several papers in order to prove and distinguish themselves. Unfortunately, it’s like campaign financing: the first individual to deviate from conducting business as usual will be at a disadvantage compared to everyone else. Leaving aside the need to publish enough to gain entry into the field, it seems to me that a little further into one’s career quantity issues should recede in importance compared to quality indexed by originality and breadth of impact. This possibility might be kept in mind in considering the construction of the optimal vita.

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Proper Publishing

I just read Henry Roediger's article "The Great Handbook Scam" [*Observer*, February 2004] and wanted to convey my appreciation for his honesty and courage. Being relatively new to the field of psychology, the lack of honest evaluation of many of our motivations to publish is as alarming as it is personally frightening. Publishing to keep the academic wolves at bay, to stroke our egos, or merely to turn a buck makes for personal as well as social paralysis – not to mention poor publications.

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