

ALBA-IBRO Diversity Podcast - From Postdoc to PI

Episode 5: Redefining success: choosing your compass in academia

Transcript

Harmit Malik | 00:00.120

You really do need to find a little bit of a marriage between the practical aspects of running a lab, but still realize there's a reason you got into science in the first place. And if you forget about that, then what's the point of the career?

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:17.719

Do you dream of being the next group leader, but feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead? Then we've got just what you need.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:24.719

What if you could learn from scientists all over the world? What if you could listen to them as a guide to what comes next?

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:32.329

You've come to the right place.

Harmit Malik | 00:34.208

I'm Jonathan Weitzman.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:35.551

And I'm Renaud Pourpre.

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:39.227

And you're listening to the Alba Ibro Diversity Podcast.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:41.368

Turn up the volume and let's dive into running your own lab. Previously on this season two of Alba Ibro Diversity Podcasts. We sailed through four episodes on the ocean of an academic career. And if you're still here, it must be because you want to find out where this journey ends. What is the final destination?

Jonathan Weitzman | 01:14.589

To summarize, in the first episode, we set sail by exploring the fears that arise just before launching your own laboratory. In episode two, we discovered... How to build your own ship by drawing inspiration from scientists who create thriving laboratories with limited resources. Episode 3 led us to reflect on our crew and examine how inclusive leadership and laboratory culture help maintain crew cohesion. And in episode 4 we faced the storm head-on revealing how early career group leaders can navigate power dynamics and institutional challenges.

Renaud Pourpre | 02:00.905

So here we are, now that you have weathered all the challenges, how do you know if you have finally made it? For many of us, we were told academia is a journey towards a destination called success. But do we know exactly how to get there?

Jonathan Weitzman | 02:20.416

In fact, our academic system has created several... career compasses. These might help us to identify that we're heading in the right direction. The number of publications, impact factors of journals, or maybe the size of our laboratory, or even prestigious awards that we've received. But when we contemplate these criteria, a fundamental question arises. Is this also my vision of success? And when I get there, what will happen?

Renaud Pourpre | 02:52.480

So get yourself comfortable, because in this final episode, we are going to ask, what does it mean to be successful in academia?

Rachael Dangarembizi | 03:01.536

I want to come back a little bit to the metrics and talk about publication and how hard it actually is to publish.

Jonathan Weitzman | 03:08.723

This is Rachael Dangarembizi, an African neuroscientist at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. She's also the current director of the ALBA Network and advocates that Africa holds the expertise and leadership to drive global solutions to new infectious diseases.

Rachael Dangarembizi | 03:27.271

Well, not hard per se, but as an early career researcher, that's one of the challenges I actually face. You know, when I was planning, I was like, yeah, we'll do this, get the data, this, this, that. It seemed all automatic. And then now I have plenty of data and I'm like, do I publish this now? Do I go into a high impact factor journal? What am I expected to do? Because it's a system on its own. It is very consuming. their rules are not necessarily written down, but they're there. You know, high impact factor journals, I think, even though everyone is like, oh, no, don't worry about that. Just think about the story. But that is what determines my career progression and my promotion and things like that. So we have sort of struggled with a publication strategy. And it's hard to make that decision. Do I just publish data as I get it in low impact? Do I wait to get that nature paper? In our last meeting, this is exactly what we were discussing. And I was like, I'm feeling the pressure of publishing quickly, but I'm also feeling the pressure of wanting to publish a meaningful, more, you know, comprehensive body of work. But I also know that my career development depends on it because people are really counting the number of publications I've got, regardless of the impact or how comprehensive the story is. or I feel like this whole publish and perish thing, in as much as it sounds cliché, it is really, really real. And as an early career scientist, you struggle with that.

Renaud Pourpre | 04:58.427

Rachael highlights a reality that is palpable for many scientists. Every ship that leaves port is judged on the basis of visible elements, but sometimes difficult to set up or measure. In academia, these elements are publications, awards or grants. For many young captains, academia sees their success beginning and ending with these metrics.

Michaela Fenckova | 05:23.626

It's obligatory. and if you don't define name and make your peer recognition concrete in terms of grants, awards, prizes. It's hard to get another grant. That's how it is.

Jonathan Weitzman | 05:39.777

This is Misha Fenckova, who leads a research laboratory at the University of South Bohemia in the Czech Republic. She's received the prestigious National L'Oreal UNESCO for Women in Science Award and is a member of the FENS Kavli Network of Excellence and the FENS Committee for Higher Education and Training. Even though she recognizes the demands of the system, Misha admits that her personal vision of success diverges from the norms of the academic system.

Michaela Fenckova | 06:09.965

I basically think success doesn't belong to academia. I think it's a passion, something that makes you happy. It's the meaning of your life that could be the success in academia. Yeah, when I feel that what I do, my science, my research, is the meaning of my life and that I have a passion and I'm happy for more towards myself. It's definitely not comparison with the others. That's what I wanted to say.

Renaud Pourpre | 06:36.643

Perhaps you find yourself in the same situation, struggling to reconcile your definition of success with the one of the system. And we understand that. But how? Could we find other compasses to guide us between what matters to us and what the system expects? To do so, we stepped outside the neuroscience field for our vision to be challenged. We asked Harmit Malik, a professor at the Fred Hutch Cancer Center in Seattle, an HHMI investigator and member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

Harmit Malik | 07:13.618

I have a very arrogant way to define success professionally for myself, and that comes from my training as a geneticist, which is I call it the deletion test, which I've shamelessly stolen from another famous geneticist, Jerry Rubin. And so the idea is not so much that, you know, you're working and you're publishing great papers. The idea is that if your contributions to science were removed from the record, would it have any consequence at all? Or would it really be just by mass action be done by many other labs, you know, you would not really it would not have made any difference. And it's both a very sad way to think about things, but it's also like a, it really brings clarity because you sort of are reminded that, you know, as an enterprise, science doesn't depend on you. You really are a cog in the wheel and you, you have, you're standing on the shoulders of others who've come before you and others will stand on the work that you published. It's, it's really like this continuum. And that's actually a really freeing thing when you

realize that because you realize that the whole thing is not going to fall apart because you took a weekend off. As long as you're basically actively working on things that you hope will pass the deletion test. And you won't really know if that's true until long after the fact. But as long as you're actively working on things that are not just what you think you need to do to check the boxes of a professional career. but you're really doing things which will bring you fulfillment because you're working on things that other people are not thinking about or working on, I think you can actually be quite successful in your own sort of puzzle-solving sessions because this brings you joy, this brings you fulfillment. And what you're doing is, at least for a short period of time, unique and interesting to you alone.

Jonathan Weitzman | 09:08.373

In the same thought experiment, we asked Srikanth Ramaswamy to share his vision of what success could be. Sri is an Associate Professor in Computational Neuroscience at Newcastle University in England. He is a founding scientist of the Blue Brain Project at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne and also one of the founders of the Alba-Ibro Diversity Podcast.

Srikanth Ramaswamy | 09:35.711

We, of course, always like to talk about success in any environment, but in academia, I think we should be talking a lot more about failures because that's what we encounter. lots of failures and a few so-called successes here and there, right? So like speckles of successes embedded in oceans of failure. But to me, success is the kind of legacy. you leave behind in terms of the people you train, in terms of how they carry forward, in how you plant these little seeds that germinate into saplings that could then grow into something much bigger. So that's the legacy you're leaving behind. And to me, success is a lot about carrying this legacy forward, like nurturing the next generation of people, which is not necessarily about paper. or grant or whatever, but really in nurturing people, empowering people, in pushing them up in whatever little way you can. And seeing others succeed is your success, in my opinion.

Renaud Pourpre | 10:44.979

As you can see, success can manifest itself in many ways. But as we strive to achieve it, can the definition of academia truly accommodate scientific diversity? Here is Rachael. talking about the case of South Africa.

Rachael Dangarembizi | 11:01.520

Unfortunately, no, we still have to push ourselves perhaps three times more to show up at the same level as everybody else globally, because that's how it is, right? It's not an equal world as much as we would want it to be. And we're still judged by the same metrics. Nobody looks at African scientists and says, oh, yeah, they don't really have as much funding there. So their papers can be considered with far much less data. No, you submit to nature. It's got to be a paper that looks a certain way for it to be accepted, right? So it's up to us now to say, if a funder has given me funding for five years, and a lot of that time has just been swallowed up by simple things like instrument repair and, and, and, I still need to make sure that within those five years, I deliver because my life depends on it. So the pressure is much greater. That's what it means.

Jonathan Weitzman | 11:52.192

Perhaps you have felt it too, realizing that your vision of success and the one of academia clash. Could this be what is driving us to redefine what success really means to us at the personal level?

Harmit Malik | 12:05.716

In my case, definitely, I was influenced by the people I trained with, and then also the other professors I was training with. I did recognize that they were people, you know, I was sort of training with that the world would consider professionally extremely successful, but they were not necessarily very happy people. And that was also like reflected in the fact that members of their lab were not very happy people because just the strain to kind of maintain whatever that like artificial definition of professional success was was so severe whereas there were other faculty members who were just I think in my opinion as successful but had an incredible work-life balance and were not the amplitude of success and the trough of failure was not so big that it really changed you know what they did on a daily basis and I just found that very fulfilling. Like this is a career, there will be ups and downs. And it's really important for you to find lessons when you're successful, and also lessons when you're not successful, and to share them with the lab. I think it's also really important to know that this is a shared enterprise, your success is going to be defined by the people who are in the lab. That's a very scary thought when you're doing your PI, especially because so far, you've really like relied on your own, you know, wits. and your mentors to get you to the point. But now you're recruiting people who will define what success means for you. But it's also really important for you to recognize that their success is also your success. If you can just slightly change your definition, you will find that you can actually be professionally successful, but also personally fulfilled. Ultimately, I tell people that if you're professionally considered a very successful person, but you're a deeply unhappy person, that might not be a compromise that you're happy. keep.

Renaud Pourpre | 13:53.257

We were told that success is a single goal common to all. And yet, success seems to be an evolving concept. Your destination today will probably not be the destination tomorrow. Misha remembers how she experienced this turning point.

Michaela Fenckova | 14:11.574

When I was a university student and I saw the big professor, the supervisor, I exactly felt like this is the success, being like him or her. in terms of being the leader. And it definitely changed. It changed with the number of supervisors or the mentors that I had in my life because I realized that their life is not easy. And there are other things than just making it and becoming the scientist or the group leader. And the biggest complete switch turnaround was when I started my own research group.

Jonathan Weitzman | 14:51.084

In a sense, each new step defines a new destination. Perhaps, in addition to being progressive, success also has many faces.

Srikanth Ramaswamy | 15:01.225

There was this starry-eyed student, you know, who thought that, oh, looking at this big shot professor who could explain all these scientific concepts with relative ease or, you know, looking at like a superstar scientist who's somewhere on the dais and commanding like an audience of hundreds or thousands is success, is what I thought, appearing on all these glamorous papers and is success. But of course, no. That perception has absolutely changed. I'm in the process of building my own lab, hiring people, training them, nurturing them, looking at what you think is success from a distance, what you think it should be now. You're shaping your own research direction, your own lab, training people. Yeah, it's like a difference of day and night.

Renaud Pourpre | 15:54.393

Your perception of this success today may obscure another. And moving forward... could be one path to uncover it. In this sense, you should perceive a new way of looking at an academic career. It may not be a quest for a single success, but rather a continuous journey from one to another. A much larger expedition than we were told, but divided into more achievable, more realistic steps. Now the question is, how can you continue to navigate in a sustainable way?

Jonathan Weitzman | 16:30.061

In a competitive system, every journey risks being endless. More and more publications, ever bigger projects, more and more grants. You can sense it too. Behind the quest for success lies a whirlwind. So when you reach your first success, what happens next? It is almost a philosophical question. Can we build a sustainable relationship with success? And if yes, how can we do that? We ask our guests. their advice about this, starting with harm it.

Harmit Malik | 17:03.560

It takes a lot of courage to define what professional success means for yourself. Hopefully you get to the point where, like I said, you reach the point where you're doing really good science, you're really confident in the insights that you're making, but you might not be the person who has a, you know, a cell nature science paper every six months. And that's perfectly fine because, you know, a lot of like great science is done in the trenches, you can... train great people and people will look back, you will look back at your own career and be really proud of all of the things that you kind of accomplished, all of the people that you've trained, but also like feel really glad that you were really present for your own life and did not really live it on somebody else's terms. I mean, ours is a very interesting profession, you know, like the people who can go home and switch off their brain, such that they're not thinking about the problem that they thought about during the day. They're very lucky because most of us, there's a part of our brain that is still kind of working on a problem all the time. And you never really switch off. But it's really kind of critical to realize that you really do need to switch off. Because that's when your maximum creativity comes to the fore, etc. It's understandable, you know, for your whole life, in a way you've sort of competed, whether you competed for grants, you've competed for attention, competed for jobs. Now you're competing for the very best people to come to your lab, etc. And now you're competing for prominence. But at some point, the competition you realize is like a forever thing. If you don't really actively like, okay, I'm willingly now going to step

off the carousel for a few months and realize that it's not going to be catastrophic. The lab will go on. You know, you hopefully have recruited good enough people that you can afford to take some time off and refresh your brain. Otherwise, you're sort of like in this... carousel of your own making that keeps going faster and faster. And you really feel like you have no choice but to stay on. But it is completely your choice. And I think that is the thing that sometimes people kind of delude themselves in thinking like this is the only way to be successful.

Renaud Pourpre | 19:08.077

Rachael continues on this theme and reminds us what is the most valuable resource for managing success.

Rachael Dangarembizi | 19:15.874

And so that has been a challenge, dealing with the pressures of wanting to succeed and continue showing how good we are or how great we're doing and all of that. But I think it is still important to ensure that your success is not consuming and harmful, to learn to take breaks, because if you don't take a break, your body will take a break for you at some point. And it's important to self-preserve as a resource for your science, so to speak. And that means at some point saying, no, I'm going to take a break and I'll come back fresher and more motivated. What I have on my desktop is a folder that has got all the positive things that I've had. Sometimes it's just a letter from a funder that says, congratulations, you've been awarded this. Or it's an invitation to a big meeting that I was really happy about and things like that. When it gets hard, I go to that. So I always say that to my trainees as well. I'm like, keep a folder of your powerful moments. And then in the weakest moment, you can actually go to it and it will... It will make the difference. It will show you that this is a momentary thing and you are actually good.

Jonathan Weitzman | 20:25.750

On the path to success, temptation will come your way to follow in the footsteps of others. On this, Misha shares her vision with us.

Michaela Fenckova | 20:34.762

The advice I would give to myself is focus on yourself. Because me, 20 years ago, I was valuing myself in the eyes of the others. The main thing I was interested in was what do others think. Do they consider me good enough, successful enough? And now I know that I was completely wrong. So first of all, it's harmful for you. You compare yourself with others all the time. The fact that somebody gives you a prize or somebody mentions your name in a newspaper interview, I don't know, to make you famous. This is not success because I know that it doesn't warm my heart. What warms my heart is if I do something with a passion, and it's very good, I do it properly and I'm happy from it. And this is the drive that moves me forward. I mean, it counts for science, it also counts for life.

Renaud Pourpre | 21:29.042

While we have explored the importance of your definition of success, it is still critical to consider the academic definition. In the current climate of demanding more publication and collaboration, it is also worth questioning whether our ways of measuring success shows the also evolve.

Shrikant shares his point of view on this.

Srikanth Ramaswamy | 21:52.791

The thing about academia is it's still a very feudal and a very medieval system that focuses way too much on personal achievement. I mean, to me, there needs to be a fundamental shift in how academia moves away from viewing personal achievement to really rewarding more community impact and shared progress. One foundation of this Collective success lies in building very strong networks where individual achievements could become launchpads, could become platforms for others to build on, actively sharing knowledge or resources or opportunities, you know, rather than hoarding it all up. So I think one way is for these so-called successful individuals to really form these these very strong networks, these collaborations to create a broader mentorship programs, you know, that really tries to open doors for underrepresented colleagues. We really need a way to measure success differently, right? Like trying to reward more collective outcomes rather than just individual achievements. like we need ways to to really celebrate when your team succeeds Measuring impact on community development and perhaps trying to somehow prioritize long-term sustainable progress over short-term personal gains. But of course, this is easier said than done because most of the academic framework is still very entrapped in this singular mindset. So, yeah.

Jonathan Weitzman | 23:37.078

One thing is clear. The traditional roadmap to success in academia seems clear to some, a large, well-funded laboratory, high impact. publications, prestigious awards, invitations to conferences. These milestones dominate the narrative presented to us, but they are only one version of the journey.

Renaud Pourpre | 23:58.314

Throughout this season, we have seen how rarely the academic journey is linear. Excellence, as it is often measured, tends to reward only certain paths, leaving some of us unfulfilled or unhappy. But in this episode, our guests invited us to think differently.

Jonathan Weitzman | 24:19.191

What if the sweet spot for success lies in a feeling that they all describe? The feeling of pride in having built, together with other members of the scientific community, a place in the ocean. An enterprise where you and the scientists around you feel that they belong. Maybe it's more about enjoying the journey than arriving at the destination.

Renaud Pourpre | 24:43.658

With the shifts occurring in our societies, academia must not remain static. It must certainly continue to be challenged. What is interesting about culture is its dual relationship with those who build it.

Jonathan Weitzman | 24:58.642

In a way, culture projects norms that influence our choices and visions, but it is also intimately influenced by our collective values. Perhaps then, one secret to ensure that the success of

some is the success of all lies in mentoring the next generation of scientists, promoting an inclusive and collaborative scientific culture.

Renaud Pourpre | 25:29.575

What a journey, Jonathan.

Jonathan Weitzman | 25:31.657

Yes, Renaud, this one may be finished for us, but for you, dear listener, it may be just the beginning. This podcast was definitely a big challenge for us and for the Alba Network, and we would like to extend our warm thanks to Mathilde Morgan at Alba Network. who helped us stay on track and share valuable feedback.

Renaud Pourpre | 25:56.205

This podcast was designed as a five-episode guide, a map to help you and your fellow scientists chart the most meaningful journey through the vast ocean of an academic career. Although we could not cover everything, we hope that you could find tips and resources for your own journey. And if the content resonated with you, We invited you to share it to give it visibility. Even more, if you think this podcast can help colleagues in need, then don't hesitate.

Jonathan Weitzman | 26:30.980

If you'd like to keep exploring these themes, we invite you to visit the Alba Network website. There you'll find webinars, past podcasts and many more conversations that dive deeper into the challenges and opportunities we've just touched on in this series. I am Jonathan Weitzman.

Renaud Pourpre | 26:55.993

And I am Renaud Paupre.

Jonathan Weitzman | 26:58.355

And as the host of the Lonely Pipette podcast, we thank you for listening and look forward to our next adventure. À bientôt! Thank you for listening to this episode. And we also thank our special guests, Rachael, Harmit, Misha, and Sri for sharing their stories and tips with us. This podcast was brought to you with the support of the International Brain Research Organization, a founding partner of the ALBA Network. The ALBA Network is a division of FENS and aims to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion to counteract bias and fight discrimination in brain research. For more information on this podcast, visit www.alba.network.