What is real success in nursing research?


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What is real success in nursing research?

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Who and what can define what success is in research? With the United Kingdom’s seven-yearly Research Excellence Framework and recent anniversaries such as the 40th of the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* providing an opportunity to look back and assess progress made and successes achieved. But how much do we do this as individual researchers?

Research success in nursing occurs mostly in a small disciplinary goldfish bowl. While the profession has progressed in terms of the number of journals, professors and volume of nursing research, whether this research and those leading it have been successful is debatable (Thompson, 2003a,b; Thompson & Watson, 2009). The low volume of citations that the papers of many full professors of nursing in the UK have attracted has been documented (Thompson & Watson, 2010; Watson, *et al.*, 2017). Still too few nursing focused papers are published in more impactful or even specialist interdisciplinary journals.
There seems to be a marked contrast between the lens through which many established nurse academics see themselves and traditional indicators of success in research. While nurse academics acclaim that they publish their research in niche journals to ensure that specialist audiences read and use it, this seems to have little influence on the extremely low citation rates that many papers in nursing receive. Many nurse academics continue to publish in an extremely narrow range of journals – most of moderate or low impact. While this may minimize the likelihood of manuscript rejection, it does little to serve the longer-term interests of nursing research. Prioritizing expedience and quantity of work over quality and visibility, alas all too often the relatively modest academic productivity, is accompanied with none too modest entitlement.

How can nursing research be more truly successful – not just in the minds of those who do it – but in the broader scientific and other communities which access and use it?

**Success is not mind-dependent**

Firstly, it is important to recognize that success is not mind-dependent (Clark & Sousa 2018). Rather: it is ‘out there’ and determined by a complex fusion of peer and community recognition both in the present and over time (Clark & Sousa 2018). While the individual may perceive their work as successful, this should not be confused or conflated with quality or actual success. Taking a realist perspective, personal perceptions of success are different from actual success. When specifying what constitutes success and evaluating whether this has been achieved, researchers should reflect, be open and look beyond their own perceptions to consider how others see their work and how they can ascertain their degree of success from the perspectives of others.
Success is diverse but not everything

There are many forms of success in research (Clark & Thompson, 2015). Some work leads to extensive local change – other research to more modest global change. Some work is extremely creative and innovative – other work solid and steady. While it remains vital and vibrant that research success comes in many forms, not everything can be seen as success (Clark & Thompson, 2013). There remains a clear vested interest in individual researchers perpetuating and peddling ‘success narratives’ despite their own research being comparatively more slight than this spin. Yet, criteria for academic success is actually well agreed upon across disciplines. Grant dollars, impact and influence of publications, social reputation: all are important indicators of success. Sometimes we only see what we want to see and it is tempting to see or render everything as successful - the publication in the predatory journal, the institutional collaboration, the grant application made. Yet, how many of these are truly successful? How many would stand up in other disciplines as lasting and significant contributions?

Success is reputational but measurable

Metrics don’t mean everything - but they don’t mean nothing either. It’s all too tempting to be dismissive of or blind to metrics. We have heard it all. “My complex work cannot be reduced to mere numbers...”; “My work is for specialist audiences who don’t fit well with the way science normally works”; “I have had 17 publications last year...” Thus, we take a pass of the way science is normally evaluated - via its widespread uptake by peers in and beyond our fields, as measured and measurable via conventional metrics, such as citation rates and the degree of contribution the research is seen to have made. While metrics should always be used responsibility and measures such as H indexes have clear weaknesses - such as privileging seniority- an aggregate of measures
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Sousa 2018) can dominate via supposedly successful researchers who can garner high levels of name recognition within nursing but scant regard outside.

These are tough messages. To recognize that success depends on the talents and skills of aspiring and experienced researchers and those who support them an honest, critical, objective and impartial look at the current status of nursing research and knowledge exchange is required. This will include an examination of issues such as research culture, environment, strategy, coordination, communication, capacity and capability, training, quality and performance. Only by undertaking such a frank assessment can we then attempt to build a thriving and sustainable research culture that fosters new ideas, innovation and creativity, engenders communication, collaboration and coordination, inspires, engages and enriches researchers and others and contributes to a culture in which excellence in research can flourish and success be likely guaranteed.

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