Juggling slow and fast science

To the editor — The slow-science movement started as a call for a healthier and better science culture, described by Lisa Alleva¹ in 2006 as a ‘rewarding and pleasurable’ way of doing science¹. The movement has been gaining momentum over the past years, and, in an opinion piece published in November 2019, Uta Frith² argued that fast science is “bad for both science and scientists.” Only a few months later, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. The impacts of SARS-CoV-2 accelerated science in an unforeseeable manner. A year later, more than 97,000 scientific manuscripts about COVID-19 could be found on the PubMed database and 50+ vaccines were in clinical development (<https://covid-nma.com/vaccines/mapping/>), suggesting that 2020 brought the scientific community to an even faster pace. What does the speed of science amidst the pandemic mean for young scientists?

The current academic system promotes quantity over quality, rewards fast-paced science, and ostracizes scientists who do not fit this profile³. In this ‘publish or perish’ culture, young scholars, especially those competing for permanent positions, are expected to publish frequently in high-impact journals⁴.

The speed of science is directly related to power structures and inequalities⁵. Fast science reinforces gender and racial disparities, disfavours underrepresented groups⁶. It affects the mental health of young researchers, especially those burdened with impostor syndrome⁷. For some scholars, a more diverse, more collaborative, and

healthier academic environment is only possible through slow science^{5,6}.

As early-career childless Latina biologists, the pandemic brought us a sense of urgency to contribute to scientific knowledge about COVID-19 and the motivation to work harder and faster. However, we now find ourselves in a dilemma: while any decrease in productivity is questioned by senior collaborators, who remain oblivious to the need to adjust their expectations of our work rate, a boost in productivity gets a side-eye from young peers who assume that fast science is inherently flawed and that slow science is the only way towards high-quality research⁸. Besides, engaging in fast science is sometimes perceived as an insult to female peers who had their lives overturned by the pandemic and can no longer engage in scholarly work. Sadly, we learned that slow scientists can be quick to judge, and in a somewhat strange plot twist, we now feel guilty for the ‘privilege’ of being overworked.

While advocating for a more diverse, inclusive, and healthier science, we feel that the dichotomy created between slow and fast science has added another layer of anxiety to an already disquieting scenario. We agree that some science cannot and should not be rushed⁹, but COVID-19 has also taught us that some science cannot and should not be slowed. During the pandemic, the assumption that one speed fits all, whether fast or slow, is revealed to be more hurtful than helpful.

As we juggle expectations and scrutiny, we remind the scientific community that the slow science movement can only exist as a collective enterprise. We underline that attempts to design a normative speed of science is inherently against the principles

of the slow science movement. We urge the scientific community to respect and value the peculiarities of different fields and the working rhythms, styles, and circumstances of different scientists. Only then will scientists have the chance and the support needed to flourish and contribute at their own pace. □

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Competing interests

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