Book Review: *The Productive Researcher*
Mark S. Reed, (Huntly: Fast Track Impact 2017) RRP £17.99

Holly Rebecca Parker, University of Lincoln
e-mail: hParker@lincoln.ac.uk

**ABSTRACT**
This article is a book review of Mark S. Reed’s 2017 publication, *The Productive Researcher*. The text helps current PhD students and early years researchers understand their priorities in order to gain a better work-life balance. The most important message of this book lies in Reed’s assertion that being more productive does not necessarily mean producing more work, but rather ‘opens up the choice to produce more; or to produce no more’.

Reed’s support of a better work-life balance in academia is refreshing, and suggests that the power to be successful does not necessarily lie in burning oneself out, but by reminding one to set clear goals and boundaries. Overall, this book is an insightful read that I would recommend to academics at all stages of their career.


**REVIEW**
In 2017, Mark S. Reed published *The Productive Researcher*, a book which aims to help early years researchers and PhD students become more productive. Reed uses his own experiences to guide the book and is influenced by some of the world’s more successful academics from varying fields in a bid to understand how they are so productive. Refreshingly, Reed does not preach to the reader, but rather offers advice based on his own experiences and in some cases, failures. The humanity and relatability Reed offers his reader makes the advice to restructure one’s priorities more palatable, while suggesting that a researcher does not need to burn themselves out in order to be productive; something which is incredibly important to emphasise in contrast to increasing pressures for academics to achieve sometimes inhuman volumes of work.

Divided into two main sections, Reed first employs exercises – or as Reed calls them, ‘lessons’ – in which the reader can re-evaluate their motivations and priorities, before a second section demonstrates ways to apply the new goals, and a final appendix shows the most productive researchers in the world, giving the reader hope that these techniques will actually be successful.

One of the most useful exercises employed in the first section tackles how to combat ‘Imposter Syndrome’. Imposter Syndrome is a condition which essentially denotes a person who believes they are a fraud, who has somehow deceivingly worked their way into academia – or another career or situation - and is now simply waiting to be discovered. In my experience, this phenomenon is exceedingly common in academics; particularly so in PhD students and early years researchers who usually lack the publications seemingly needed to validate them. Helpfully, Reed spends time addressing this syndrome without patronising the reader or undermining
the condition. To tackle this syndrome Reed presents ‘The ManyStory Approach’, which asks the supposed imposter to reevaluate their internalised self-narratives. To do so, one must first ‘loosen the grip of unhelpful stories about yourself’, and ‘discover more helpful and empowering stories about yourself’ before finally taking time to ‘enrich and embed your new story’ to overcome the negative narratives that drive the syndrome. In some ways, Reed simply presents rationality as a cure for these anxieties during this ‘lesson’.

However, rather than preaching or offering inspirational knowledge, Reed offers techniques that are achievable and productive. One must assess the stories that colleagues and friends tell about their values and dismiss the negative ones before reconstructing empowering messages based on positive stories the person has been told. Importantly, ‘to be powerfully believable, these stories need to be based on evidence’. Simply put, this advice essentially recommends an approach which academics of all disciplines use daily: assess and analyse the evidence in front of you. Thankfully, though, Reed does not patronise the reader by suggesting this task is simple, merely that the ManyStory Approach is a productive technique which requires time and effort to embed. It is impressive that Reed has included work on self-worth as a valid factor within his definition of a productive researcher. Moreover, the fact that Reed transparently addresses the phenomenon within the book is especially fruitful as he works towards interrogating a common issue within the academy that is often treated as taboo (The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, for instance, has thus far failed to officially recognise ‘Imposter Syndrome’ as a condition).

After each ‘lesson’ Reed employs textbook style summaries which are worthy of particular note. These summaries encapsulate the message of each point Reed argues, and allow the reader to return to the techniques quickly and frequently without getting hindered by long passages of information. This allows the reader to navigate the second section more clearly by allowing them to refer back to the techniques that Reed goes on to implement within the second section. They also allow the book to be continually helpful, as one could simply skim-read a summary and remember a technique they had forgotten to act on.

The second section focuses on utilising the techniques and motivations the reader has identified earlier. For instance, Reed suggests how to tackle the endless task of replying to emails. In the section – and indeed throughout the entire second section – Reed uses his own successes and failures to inform his advice. ‘I sometimes have bad days where I allow my email to dominate’, Reed writes, but the key insight is to recognise the threat posed by emails, and though using the motivations the reader identified in part one, one can be aware of which emails they should reply to in order to best meet their needs. This, in turn, will help reduce the time spent on emails, giving a better work-life balance, and making your work hours more productive. Importantly, the systems that Reed proffers throughout The Productive Researcher are processes that he has worked through himself before recommending. This gives a greater air of credibility to Reed’s advice: they are techniques he has spent time perfecting, rather than mimicking traditional and sometimes uniformed ‘self-help’ techniques.

Reed also refers to the ‘ten of the most productive researchers in the world’ throughout the text. The inclusion of these details from successful and productive academics adds a level of relatability to the text that reiterates the potential success of adopting Reed’s techniques. These researchers use techniques that allow them to create world-leading research without

2. The Productive Researcher, p32
3. The Productive Researcher, p172
burning themselves out. My only criticism is that the information on these productive researchers has been attached as an appendix. I feel that without these real-life examples, the text would lack the gravitas it holds, and not paying due respect to the academics that have helped inform Reed’s knowledge of successful techniques is a shame.

Overall, taking into account the plethora of techniques Reed presents, the most useful aspect of this book is its focus on prioritising your existing methods. Refreshingly, rather than simply lecturing readers on the best methods and motivations, Reed encourages researchers to find their own priorities. This allows one to shape their methods according to their own requirements and (SMART) goals, rather than using a one-size-fits-all-method, which would be bound to fail. Reed adopts humility throughout, admitting the long process he has undergone to achieve a successful work-like balance; to do less to do more; and that being more productive does not necessarily mean producing more.

REFERENCES