When I was a high school student in my home country of Greece, good students were expected to become doctors, and my biology teacher insisted that I apply to medical school. But the idea of being a doctor did not excite me, and I pursued “basic” biology instead. In this case and the ones to follow, I couldn’t guarantee at the time that I was making the right decisions. But I knew that, because they were based on my personal preferences, they would be harder to regret.

Years later, as I was wrapping up my Ph.D. after having spent countless hours centrifuging yeast, I couldn’t wait to work with a new model organism. When an older, successful collaborator told me, “The model system doesn’t matter; what matters is the scientific question that you want to answer,” I was ashamed to admit to myself that I didn’t feel the same way. Almost any scientific question can trigger my curiosity, and I didn’t want to spend long hours with some experimental model that didn’t interest me.

Around that time, I took a course on model organisms and fell in love with the tiny roundworm *C. elegans*. Their simplicity and short life cycle were a good match for my impatience: A daily feeling of discovery helps calm my existential angst. But the worm wouldn’t take me high on the scientific ladder, my colleagues told me. I was advised to go to a mouse lab and do more hardcore science. I valued the input, but I couldn’t discount my own feelings. So, somewhat insecure in my decision, I followed my intuition and spent the next 8 years happily probing these humble creatures.

As the years went by, I knew that I needed to move on, which typically would mean opening my own lab. But I found myself doing anything possible to delay this transition. My gut feeling was that I wouldn’t be happy as a principal investigator (PI) supervising other people’s experiments.

The freedom of choice

A postdoc friend recently called me to discuss his career options. He didn’t want to run his own lab, he said. Instead, he wanted to become a research scientist, mainly working at the bench—like me. I sensed that his mind was already made up, but he needed validation about pursuing a path that is not generally thought of as a professional success. Our conversation got me thinking about my own decision to become a research scientist—and about other career choices I made that went against the norm.

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As the years went by, I knew that I needed to move on, which typically would mean opening my own lab. But I found myself doing anything possible to delay this transition. My gut feeling was that I wouldn’t be happy as a principal investigator (PI) supervising other people’s experiments. Or was I simply a coward, afraid of the unknown? I put off making a decision by taking a research scientist position in the lab of a new PI so that I could see the job up close, with all its benefits and struggles. My decision again disappointed my scientific advisers and even some of my friends. I was hesitant and anxious about it myself. But I was unable to follow advice that didn’t resonate with me.

My experiences over the next 5 years reinforced my decision not to pursue PI positions. I realized that I like being the person who not only thinks of scientific questions, but also performs the experiments. I don’t want to miss the eureka moments at the lab bench, even if the discovery is as insignificant as a new transgenic worm. I need this daily feeling of personal accomplishment that I get from being an experimentalist.

But quite wrongly, research (or staff) scientist positions in academia are associated with lack of ambition or scientific drive. This view needs to change, and more positions need to be created for the increasing number of qualified scientists who are not interested in opening their own labs or who do not secure the few faculty positions available. And scientists like me, who are not interested in becoming PIs, should be confident in our decisions and advocate for the research scientist position to be recognized as a valid professional choice. When there is a mismatch between what society considers successful and our own definitions of success, we need to hold fast to our beliefs and follow our own road to personal satisfaction.

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The freedom of choice
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