

Prof's CV of Failures Goes Viral (and Why That's a Good Thing)

Sometimes we feel good about other people's failures. Too often, that's the feeling the Germans called *Schadenfreude*—not something to be proud of. But sometimes the human instinct to relish in the failure of others can be used to instruct.

That's the implication of a *Washington Post* "Wonkblog" from last week entitled "[Why it feels so good to read about this Princeton professor's failures](#)." But Johannes Haushofer, a professor of psychology and public affairs at Princeton, was not the subject of some exposé offering an object lesson in the wages of sin. He actually decided to note his career failures [in his curriculum vitae](#) and publish the whole thing online. You can see a snapshot of it below.

The interesting question is *why*. An academic's CV is his or her professional passport. It must not only be submitted for job applications but is sometimes required for other career-related activities. PhD students are taught how to build up a CV and are urged to stud it with peer-reviewed publications, papers they gave at conferences, grants they received, etc. The purpose is to make them look impressive enough to stand out from, or at least keep up with, the grueling competition for future faculty jobs. So why note one's failures on such documents?

Well, seeing one's peers and elders apparently having one success after another is one reason why many younger professionals, especially academics, are so dour and insecure. They see those CVs/resumés and wonder whether they'll ever really measure up. But that's exactly why Haushofer's bold move is so noteworthy. It helps people to feel okay with not

being perfect.



Most people eventually learn that the road to success is usually pockmarked with failures. But applying that lesson to our personal lives is often difficult; few professionals feel free to publicly admit their own failures for various reasons (insecurity, egotism, fear that it would hinder career advancement, etc.).

So when an accomplished pro publicly reveals the failures on his road to success, people can identify with him and admire his honesty. It makes people in the field—whatever it may be—feel better. The article’s author, Ana Swanson, actually notes and links to some prior research showing just that. So Haushofer has probably helped some people by doing this.

Could he be starting a trend? Unlikely. Humility is not exactly the norm in academia. Few can sell themselves by noting their failures. And as Haushofer says, with typical academic irony, “This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work.”

That attention suggests that Schadenfreude probably isn’t going away after all.

[Image Credit: “White People” (Credit: MTV)]