

The allure of foreigners

I have 50 years of experience as a plastic surgeon, bioethicist, professor, and writer, and will turn 75 years old soon. Although I have retired 3 years ago, I have remained in touch with the scientific societies and the fascinating art of reading. Following my retirement, I have had more time to reflect on a certain issue that I have always been aware of, which revolves around an old observation that there is an intentional ignorance, or probably aversion, for the cultural and scientific work of individuals close to use, including those who live and work beside us.

This is reflected in the marked lack of citations of studies by local authors in the reference lists, both in scientific papers presented at conferences as well as in those published in specialized journals. An exception to this rule is noted among individuals who belong to the same institution or group of authors of a particular study. One can observe an almost nauseating ethnocentrism when reviewing the mediocrity of some of the cited publications that do not contribute to the newly added and existing literature.

Generally, the Department head always has his studies cited in the reference list, even when the content of his studies has no relevance or importance to the design or development of the study. This is done as a form of flattery to the Department head or, even worse, in some case as an imposition, so that he can add to his resume. I will surely not touch upon the prevailing feature of opportunistic co-authorships.

At particular events, the training of the teaching staff follows similar principles. Foreign researchers and authors are invited to present their work, which may often be repetitive or very poor, instead of a local researcher who may have made more significant contributions. An exception is made in the case of local researchers who may be involved in the system of exchanging favors. During the subsequent events, those who grant such favors will always be considered as elite guests.

In the cultural sector as well, the situation is not very different. It could be possible that because international authors are targeted to a greater extent by the international media, these authors always receive more attention from the national media as well as major publishers, and are also provided spaces on more visible counters of bookstores. In contrast, the books of local authors, who may be occasionally rewarded for the quality of their work, are stored in the bottom shelves of bookstores and are ignored by the national press. Although there are certain exceptions to this rule, these often occur due to factors other than the quality of the product.

Several factors can explain this phenomenon, the most obvious being envy, which arises from the fear of competition. Often, those who hold power for making decisions regarding which author or presenter will get the opportunity to publish or disseminate a specific work are the ones who fear having themselves outshone by their colleague.

Let us not fall into the ignoble pit of generalizations, or be associated with ridiculous localism. There are obviously a number of authors, researchers, and professors from other cities, states, and countries who possess extraordinary knowledge and experience. However, as they are from distant places, they are associated with a sense of novelty of language or even exoticism; in particular, the distance provides security to those who are insecure.

To admit that a colleague in the same institution stands out, particularly someone who has had similar opportunities, and someone who lives beside us, is – for certain individuals – to admit one's own mediocrity. This is emphasized even more in cases where the other individual is a professional competitor. Therefore, we tend to be more supportive of the failures of the ones closer to us, rather than celebrating, supporting, and contributing to their success.

In order to overcome jealousy, we should first recognize that we have it. Moreover, to do so, we should strengthen our self-esteem, which reflects our own values and limitations. Thus, this is not an easy task, but a great challenge.

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