Decolonizing expertise

In the TV show Better Call Saul, Saul Goodman, an untrustworthy lawyer, discovers a massive fraud case. He presents this case to a big lawyer company to get some help to put the case together. In exchange for bringing the case, the head of this big company offers Saul a fair amount of money, which is promptly accepted. However, Saul requires one nonnegotiable condition: a room in the company so that he can organically be part of the investigation. The company says no, and Saul refuses the money because recognizing his intellectual merit in the case was a priority. From TV shows to real life, and in a very different environment than lawyer companies, researchers in institutions from the Global South probably can see the parallels with the situation described before. In the academic environment, Global North institutions and researchers have traditionally led the research world for centuries, extending the frontiers of scientific knowledge. Scientific research in the Global South is often seen as peripherical, and Southern researchers struggle to find recognition and intellectual approval from the North.

In the last ten years, concerns about diversification, equality, and inclusion in the academic environment have grown [ref], mainly towards the direction of increasing the diversity in research environments by stimulating researchers from underrepresented groups (women, Global south, LGBTQI+, black people, to cite a few) in research institutes and universities of the Global North. Nowadays, it is rare to find a call that does not contain the statement “We highly encourage applicants from underrepresented backgrounds…”. While we acknowledge that efforts to build inclusive teams are one of the pillars toward decolonization of science 1, we also believe that this action alone does not change the *status quo* of science, in which researchers from the global North are viewed as experts while researchers from the global south are seeing as rare exceptions of scientific authority, or even doing untrustworthy science (like Saul Goodman). Expertise colonization manifest in different instances. One is the citation bias towards global north researchers. Another example is the underrepresentation (not to cite cases of complete lack of recognition) of scientists from the global south as plenary speakers or even their presence in conferences, and editorial boards of traditional journals, only to cite a few. Like in Lord of The Rings’ famous quotation “the one ring to rule them all” we still live a type of “the one knowledge to rule them all,” and as we know, the path to Mordor (or academic decolonization) is not easy.

While we acknowledge some progress represented by positive interventions to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in science, as mentioned above, little or nothing has been done to decolonize expertise. That implies recognizing the knowledge produced outside the Global North as being as reliable and scientifically sound as the one made by research institutes in the Global North. To achieve this, some practices deeply rooted in science must be changed. Here, we argue that if the Global North is committed to changing the *status quo* of scientific knowledge, researchers and research institutes must do a better job toward actions that improve the intellectual visibility of underrepresented groups by first, recognizing practices in scientific work that promote intellectual colonialism, and then, by acknowledging that, moving forward to implement actions that decolonize expertise.

**Recognizing intellectual colonialism: some examples**

Scientific solutions require specific and contextual knowledge, especially in the current context of global changes. For example, management actions and policies developed to protect and maintain biological diversity and ecosystem services might not be the same in tropical and temperate regions. Consequently, specialists and scientific knowledge produced in those places must be heard and read to develop better solutions. One recent example of intellectual colonialism was a panel in which the aim was to debate the future and policies of the Brazilian Amazon Forest. However, this panel was built with not a single Brazilian researcher (after public pressure, the event was canceled).

Another classic example of intellectual colonialism is the bias in citations and claims of scientific discovery. Citations and recognition of scientific achievements are usually measured through the number of citations (even though the controversies around this measure). However, it is common that papers produced by researchers or institutions from the Global South are not cited in studies from research groups from the Global North, even publications presented in high-impact and traditional journals. This situation creates a vicious cycle in which knowledge is dictated by northern institutions, mainly in Europe and North America, maintaining the *status quo* of scientific expertise.

**Some suggestions from Global south**

Some simple actions can be taken to reduce the intellectual colonization practices in science, and here we cite a few that can help to solve the problems mentioned. Despite most of our suggestions being derived from situations in Ecology and Evolution, we believe that the points here can be applied to any scientific area.

*Journals, societies, and boarding members of scientific meetings/events*

Always ask whether the event, journal, or boarding committee is inclusive enough? How many editors are from underrepresented countries? Depending on the answer to those simple questions, we can move on to possible solutions toward DEI. Regarding scientific societies, one possibility to decolonize expertise is the implementation of programs to support the submission of papers from the Global South by language support. One recent example is the EELS program (Evolution English Language Support) promoted by the Society for the study of evolution. The program offers cost-free English language editing for non-native English-speaking authors, reducing the language barriers to scientific publication.

*Authors from the Global North and research groups*

It is common for editors and reviewers to request to cite works that were forgotten during the literature review process. However, almost all the time, those references comprise studies from researchers or institutions in the Global North. We suggest that authors from the Global North check if their references are inclusive enough given the topic in their studies. Some may argue that this can comprise an extra work loading, but we see it as the same workload that authors from Global South have when asked to review their references or cite works from Global North authors. As mentioned before, citations are one of the currencies in the academic job market and a proxy of intellectual merit. If the whole system of authority revolves around authors from the Global North, no matter the quality of work from the Global South, their intellectual merit will never be recognized, no matter its quality.

**Final message**

Research institutes outside the global North still have a long way ahead when compared with the Global north institutes regarding the number of publications (in terms of quantity), and different factors can explain this [ref]. However, in terms of quality, there are numerous examples of universities and research groups of excellence in the Global South that are a reference in different areas of Ecology and Evolution (to not mention other areas in STEM), even struggling with reduced budgets and historical scientific colonialism. Here we showed some simple actions that can dramatically change the *status quo* of scientific knowledge. Recognizing intellectual colonialism practices is the first step, but not enough if the aim of scientific practitioners is to build a truly inclusive environment and reduce inequalities. We can learn from the great Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire that praxis, i.e., “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it,” is the only way toward a non-oppressive, inclusive, and diverse science. The Global south wants a room at the same place the global North is at.

References

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