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The uncertainty principle

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg believes that everyone needs three places: home, work and a 'third place'. In the United States, the third place is, increasingly, the coffee shop. In Britain, it is without doubt the pub. And in Finland, it's the sauna, as I learned the other month while visiting the country.

Apart from aiding relaxation, saunas play a valuable role in advancing scientific discourse — as I discovered when I tried it out for myself. At a meeting earlier in the day, a reasonably well established scientist had dismissed the idea that the use of short-term grants to support young Finnish scientists is a problem. Everyone gets funded eventually, he said, and the work continues. A younger scientist had begged to differ. Short-term contracts might, at best, distract people from their work, or, at worst, put them off a scientific career in the first place, he argued.

Later that day in the sauna, the younger scientist returned to the argument. He conceded that there was some truth to the older researcher's claim — after all, he had never heard of a graduate student having to leave a programme because funding ran out. But in reality, he said, things like buying a home can become a lot harder when the bank asks you about your job security. And why would you want to train in a country that doesn't guarantee your funding over the course of your education when you can go to one that does?

Uncertainty is a powerful thing. One reason Spain is having difficulty attracting young scientists — even from its own country — is the uncertainty surrounding long-term positions after a researcher completes the much-vaunted Ramón y Cajal programme (see page 488). Spain and Finland may have different 'third places', but they both present their young scientists with a certain amount of uncertainty. If they truly want to attract and keep fresh blood, they will need to dispel this sense of insecurity.

Paul Smaglik

Naturejobs editor



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