



Speak up about subtle sexism in science

Female scientists face everyday, often-unintentional microaggression in the workplace, and it won't stop unless we talk about it, says **Tricia Serio**.

Of all the questions I have been asked in my scientific career, perhaps the most troubling came from a former department head when I told him I was expecting my second child. "Was it planned?" he asked.

I had not yet secured tenure and took his remark to suggest that I was not committed to my career.

While I inwardly seethed at his assumption, I did not challenge it. Instead, like many women, I manoeuvre around such awkward and frequently offensive situations. In fact, at a women-in-science event at which I spoke, the organizer began by sharing strategies to change the subject when faced with inappropriate comments. But why should we? When such techniques are recommended as a form of professional development, enough is enough.

The problem of sexual harassment in science has been discussed in these pages and elsewhere, but less attention is paid to more indirect, subtle or unintentional comments. I think that this behaviour, sometimes known as microaggression, poses the greatest threat to diversity in science. Don't underestimate the sting and shock that these comments can cause: they make it quickly and painfully clear to women that, whereas we take situations at face value, others overlay our gender as a relevant consideration.

In my experience, these comments are infrequently discussed, and that's a missed opportunity. To improve the climate for women in science, it's time to share our stories of microaggression. Here are two more of my own.

On attending the first meeting of my linear-algebra class in college, the professor called my name from the roster (I was the only female student) and asked, "Why are you here?" And when I requested to meet a visiting professor with whom I was interested in discussing post-doctoral research opportunities, a professor and member of my PhD dissertation committee asked me, "Why? Jeff [my significant other at the time] is doing a postdoc in another city." At the time, I perceived these comments to mean, respectively: "You don't belong in this class" and "Your career is not a priority".

Microaggression arises in any situation in which there is a substantial demographic skew, so this problem is probably not specific to science, or gender. Nevertheless, my own anecdotes, and those from colleagues, suggest that they are prevalent and have an impact. Every woman, but not one man, whom I asked had a story to tell, but none had ever told it.

Unconscious gender bias is well documented in academic science. Women are entering the training pipeline in increasing numbers, but they exit more frequently than do men, leading to their under-representation in grants awarded and in academic positions.

Could microaggressions be driving women

from science? Inexcusably, I don't think we know.

Institutions have formal complaint mechanisms for people who have been subject to illegal gender discrimination and harassment. But microaggression may have the potential to cause more widespread harm. And because it doesn't seem to be actionable, examples often go unreported.

Although it is difficult to identify an innocuous reason why my former department chair felt it would be appropriate to comment on my family-planning decisions, I've come to believe that many microaggressions are voiced without an understanding of their impact on women. Regardless of their intended meaning, once spoken, they affect us. But our own silence also contributes to the problem. By not challenging and

discussing these comments, we miss the opportunity to educate the person making them, to decrease the chances of it happening again and to minimize their impact on us.

I know from experience that simply speaking out can make a difference on both sides. A few years ago, I purchased a set of soccer referee cards to use as a joke in conversations with a group of male professors. (They are friends but could do with some clarity on how their comments are perceived.)

The first time I issued a yellow card for a comment that questioned my maths skills, we all had a good laugh. But now they will pause and ask, "Was that a yellow or a red card?" and then explain what they actually meant (the questioning of my maths skills was apparently related to

my training as a biologist rather than my gender).

Heightening awareness of these communication gaps is the first step to diminishing their frequency and effects, and I propose a small and imperfect way to do just that. I invite those who have been subject to comments that they perceive as inappropriate, and those who have had their comments perceived incorrectly as inappropriate, to share those experiences anonymously on a website that I have created (www.speakyourstory.net). I will share these stories at regular intervals.

The purpose of this invitation is not to identify individual offenders. Rather, I hope to shine a light on the perception gap that I suspect leads to many microaggressions (and their subsequent impact), and to begin to quantify its scope by field, type of institution and location. My goal is to narrow or, ideally, to eliminate this gap. Let's inspire change by moving from unspoken anecdotes to awareness. Speak your story to pave the way. ■

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