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Lab heads should learn to talk about racism

Senior academics must step up and take the lead in discussing intolerance, says Devang Mehta.

Last month, anti-Asian graffiti was painted in residences on the campus of my PhD alma mater, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich, and Asian students' work was vandalized with racist slogans. That same week brought allegations that a leading astrophysicist at the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics in Garching, Germany, had used racist language towards trainees, among other bullying. (The astrophysicist has defended her behaviour, and says her comments were distorted and taken out of context; see page 159.)

When blatantly racist incidents occur in our universities, we academics usually prefer not to address them. We leave their handling to university administrators, who tend to deal only with the most serious cases, frequently long after they have happened. In my experience, scientists often do a poor job of recognizing and dealing with racism in our workplaces. In fact, several colleagues I spoke to while writing this article expressed scepticism that racial bias even exists in the often highly international scientific work environment. This blindness to the issue keeps us from addressing racism within the close-knit structures of academic labs.

My own experiences pale in comparison to others', but are still worth recounting. I came to Europe as a graduate student from India in 2012, just as terrorism and the refugee crisis were sparking a sharp increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric. However, working in incredibly diverse labs, I felt largely insulated.

This changed when a colleague asked me to tell a Muslim colleague off for having an untidy workbench because 'they' respond better to male authority. All I could do was stare, dumbstruck. In another instance, when asked about supporting diversity in a meeting with students, a European professor laughingly admitted to not hiring Asian researchers because he found 'them' difficult to work with. And I've heard many scientists casually dismiss all published papers from labs in certain countries as bad science, in the presence of students from those very countries.

I deeply regret that during my PhD I did not talk about these experiences with my supervisors. By not doing so, I denied them the opportunity to learn from and address my concerns in the manner in which I'm now confident they would have done. Why didn't I work up the courage to report my concerns? I didn't want to rock the boat. Like many scientists from ethnic-minority groups, I was an immigrant lacking the social and economic safety nets that citizens enjoy. It was so much easier to put my head down and race towards that PhD.

Although official policies such as institutional codes of conduct and instruments of redress for serious offences are essential, individual principal investigators (PIs) also need to model the sort of communication that is lacking today. If the reluctance of junior researchers like me to talk about racism is regrettable, the silence, and hence complicity,

of senior faculty members is unconscionable. Scientists, as a community, must practise having tolerant conversations about intolerance, unconscious bias, unfair power structures and a friendlier workplace for everyone. And that just isn't happening: both the targets of and witnesses to microaggressions worry that they are reading too much into certain actions. Relevant incidents rarely reach the attention of PIs.

The lead must come from the top — from PIs, deans, provosts. The first step could be something as simple as showing a willingness to hear about racism and intolerance from students and employees. I have asked around, and I have not heard of a single instance in which a lab head, of any race or ethnicity, male or female, held a lab meeting or sent a welcome e-mail explicitly recognizing that these are real problems they are willing to discuss. I write publicly about these topics, but I find it

hard to even imagine raising racism or inequality with supervisors in face-to-face meetings unless they first signalled an openness to talk about them.

It's not easy to call out colleagues over racist comments or intolerant behaviour, but we must. For inspiration, I sometimes consider the universal ethical code for scientists devised in 2007 by David King, then the UK government's chief scientific adviser, which requires high standards of integrity for evidence and society (go.nature.com/2u7ytdt). And guidelines exist for essential conversations, for example those from the Massive Science Consortium, a group of more than 300 young scientists of which I'm a member (go.nature.com/2tsauch). One tenet is "assume good intentions and forgive". Talking about race can lead to people feeling persecuted, fairly or unfairly, and forgiveness is needed to move on

from a confrontational or racist incident. (Assuming, of course, that the incident was minor, and apologies were offered.)

Another guideline is "step back and step up". This asks privileged individuals to make sure they don't dominate a discussion, and to listen to contributions from minorities and less powerful groups.

Perhaps the most important guideline is "speak and listen from personal experience". In other words, do not instinctively question the validity of someone else's experience; this happens so often with women and minorities. It is especially apparent when institutions reflexively defend the accused. It is up to tenured professors to protest and demand more introspection from their employers and employees.

Fundamentally, tackling racism and intolerance in science requires an acknowledgement from us all that it exists. I call on senior scientists to speak up and to invite others to do so. ■

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