

The duty to speak up

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I was a medic before turning to science. Things are a little more balanced between women and men in medicine, including the top jobs. Gradients still exist but perhaps the ethical principles that we are taught in medicine — beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and autonomy — influence situations. In science, some of those gradients appear to be steeper. Bias can sometimes be palpable, often underpinned by celebration of the alpha-stereotype. Highly successful environments are frequently dominated by alpha personalities who are more likely to be male. When moments of partiality occur, those who bear witness sometimes barely acknowledge it, never mind intervene. Frequently, powerful persons are the perpetrators, and societal pressure somehow increases our ability to turn a blind eye. Yet, favouring those in influential positions is a form of positive discrimination and is as equally damaging as negative discrimination, gender-related or otherwise, because it reinforces a gradient. In science, I have learned valuable lessons about trying to level such gradients.

Lesson 1: we all have a responsibility to speak up when moments of injustice occur. So did I, at one point in my career. I questioned why I was being treated differently within a group of predominantly male, collaborating peers. My concerns were dismissed. Regrettably, the pitch of the gradient of gender bias became steeper.

Lesson 2: it takes courage to speak up, and there can be consequences. The intensity of the reaction to my speaking up was severe. I missed out on a career step, a position in a high-profile grant, a nomination for something. I did not mourn those losses. Instead, I grieved for the overall message — I was valued for my contribution, but only if I remained silent. Being rewarded on the basis of merit was for those who looked the other way. So, I walked away from that situation. One or two senior colleagues, who were in the know, metaphorically patted me on the head. I received comments like ‘these things happen’, ‘you need to keep looking successful, so keep this to yourself’, and ‘just focus on your science’. I found this perplexing. Surely these attitudes simply reinforce the gradients.

Lesson 3: talking to others helps. Expressing yourself does not make you weak.



Unpleasant experiences could make one cynical or bitter. Plus, I thought that looking tough was the same as being tough; that is not true. When I shared my story with a handful of others, I received huge support even in my male-dominated sphere. There is a lot of kindness in places that one does not expect. I gained new mentors and they have been my bedrock.

Lesson 4: turning a blind eye is not acceptable. We need to encourage our institutions and funders to do the right thing. Part of the problem in science is how we are measured in terms of publications and media coverage, with an emphasis on appearances and positive rhetoric. This can sometimes conceal a reality that is in contrast to the orchestrated verbiage. Around the time of my gender-bias experience, I was asked to write about my own ‘successful’ trajectory. This would be part of an application to raise institutional status in recognition of supporting women in science. My conscience chastised me. If I wrote it, I would be contributing to the façade. At that time, I had not yet walked away from my problematic situation and the social pressure to go with the flow was considerable. Additionally, I had a strong sense of goodwill for some of the shared past successes. So, I complied. In hindsight, it was not the right thing to do. I played a part in feeding into the hyperbole of ‘awards’, ‘drives’ and ‘endeavours’ for equality

and diversity at an institutional level that did not translate to how people were treated at an individual level.

Of late, institutions and funders have talked of taking a tough line on bullying, harassment, and on ensuring diversity and inclusion. It remains to be seen whether they will back their words with action when specific issues arise, or whether there will be special dispensation for influential people. The tough talk would then simply be hypocrisy. It would also be an opportunity missed. If not corrected, these mis-stepping powerful personalities go on to advisory boards, career-decision committees and grant-review panels, bringing and thus perpetuating their inherent prejudices.

Do we need a code of ethics in academia? When trying to raise issues one may come up against a misplaced ethos that legality matters most. It is a mindset that places priority on protecting an institution legally, no matter the cost, culminating in out-of-court-settlements and non-disclosure agreements that do not address issues openly and directly. A legal position however, may not equate to an ethical one. Slavery was perfectly legal once upon a time. Perhaps, if we placed more emphasis on doing the right thing, concerns about legality would not arise. Having a set of academic ethical principles that we should aspire to might increase the likelihood of people treating others the way they would expect to be treated themselves.

For now, to improve those gradients, we all have a responsibility. When we witness impropriety, we cannot shrug our shoulders and say ‘it’s not my problem’, because then we become part of the problem; one is complicit through silence. We need to speak up. All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for good people to remain silent. □

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