

November 30, 2017

## A word about sexist speech in the sciences

I'm a 50-year-old man who has spent three decades living in the sciences, and I recently had an experience that inspired me to speak up about sexist speech in our community.

This fall I attended a conference where I saw a talk in which the speaker told a sexist joke that shook up the room. Colleagues tell me other parts of the session I missed were also sprinkled with sexual double entendres and a suggestive image of a famous woman. I've heard the same and worse over the years, and I suspect my experiences aren't unusual.

This kind of sexist speech has always been unethical, but in the current cultural moment it is fast becoming unforgivable. Sexist speech may be passed off as subtler than the discrimination and assault that have been daily news this fall, but it is itself a form of sexual harassment. And, it forms a backdrop to these stories — an environment of thinly veiled put downs and threats that is the soil where worse behavior can grow.

Men my age have long set the social rules and tone in our community, and are a group that has both the moral obligation and the influence to shut down sexist speech. How?

Clearly and consistently identifying and responding to sexist language is essential. We haven't developed a sharp enough line surrounding it, letting us consistently call it out for what it is. I believe most people in our community know sexist speech when they hear it — if for no other reason than because we are trained by our HR departments. And our society generally does a good job identifying and condemning racist, hateful and obscene words. Men in the scientific community need to find ways to consistently do the same thing with sexist words and images. The hero of the day at my recent conference was a female colleague who spoke out after the talk I witnessed. It was a perfect moment and I'm sure was helpful to many of the women present. It will send a powerful message if we regularly hear men's voices speaking up this way.

There are pressures not to address sexist jokes or comments — it is socially uncomfortable to confront friends, and may be professionally hazardous to alienate a senior colleague. Your own conscience will have to guide you here, but for those of us with established careers these are rationalizations not reasons. Also consider that professional hazards cut both ways: A simple but effective reason for people to avoid using sexist speech is that it's unprofessional, and unprofessional speech costs you jobs, grants, and collaborators. Most men I know well think that colleagues who make sexist jokes or comments sound like jackasses. If enough of us say this, it will go far toward putting an end to this behavior.

Another important tool in the arsenal against sexist speech is the apology. If you realize you have said something that you wouldn't say in front of your Title IX officer, then say you're sorry. It is a simple act that carries a lot of meaning. I recently had a conversation with a colleague

who used a subtly sexist phrase and immediately caught himself and commented on it. Small moments like this are powerful. They teach you about yourself, and they illuminate the issue to the people around you. They say: I'm not perfect, but I know I erred and understand what I should be trying to do.

Sometimes it's hard to know exactly where an event sits on the spectrum between misunderstandings that call for a teaching moment and criminal offenses that should cost someone their job. I've found it helpful to bring these questions to one of the people responsible for inclusion, safety and discipline in our community: A department chair, manager, conference organizer, dean, or advisor. These people are trained to recognize behavior that constitutes sexual harassment, discrimination and assault, and have a menu of appropriate responses.

Finally, a more personal point: It is important to cultivate empathy for our female colleagues. Women scientists aren't under any obligation to explain their experiences to the men around them, but some I know have done so and what they have to say will shock you. Sexist speech is degrading, debasing, and can be seen as an implicit threat. The phrase you think is a clever jibe or joke is actually a signifier that points at women and can remind them of decades of discrimination, shaming and possibly violence. Anyone who understands this has to feel a deep sense of personal guilt for having propagated or permitted this sort of harm to members of our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Eiler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "E".

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