When the jokes aren’t funny

A few days before that, I was sitting in the building’s atrium with a Black colleague discussing an experimental method when a scientist from another lab joined us. Upon noticing my colleague’s Black Lives Matter pin, the scientist said, “You really ought to keep your politics at home.” We were both taken aback. Our visitor went on to declare that looting is not the right solution to George Floyd’s killing, that people need to get jobs instead of protesting all day, and that Black people shouldn’t be so angry all the time. We sat there, appalled, but didn’t say anything.

On another occasion, a former co-worker asked me—as an immigrant—how I felt about President Donald Trump’s immigration bans. I said I wished immigrants weren’t constantly viewed as a threat to the economy because we have so much to offer, particularly in niche work sectors. The person’s response was along the lines of, “At least Silicon Valley will be less of a ‘brown town’ and give others a chance.” I laughed but felt seriously uncomfortable.

Why didn’t I speak up? Because I feared repercussions—and I’m sure I’m not alone in feeling that way. On the rare occasions when I have voiced my concern about racist comments, I’ve been told I am “too much of a social justice warrior.” I’m at a precarious point in my training, because I’m currently doing lab rotations, and I will settle on a Ph.D. adviser next year. Strained relationships with my colleagues may make it harder to find a permanent lab, or they may lead to poor letters of recommendation or lost authorship opportunities.

Yet racist comments, no matter how funny some people may think they are, should not be normalized and tolerated. I feel deeply unsettled that in the current political environment, some people—including some scientists—I think it’s OK to say these things. And I wish early-career scientists like me felt more comfortable questioning them.

It will take action at all rungs of scientific institutions—from deans’ offices down to individual labs—to change the climate. We need more than a few hours of mandated online bias training to really mobilize a shift. Universities need to create safe spaces to discuss racial issues and microaggressions head-on—for example, by developing seminar series or journal clubs to educate the community about problems and to generate solutions. And science itself needs a culture change. We should commit to holding one another accountable for problematic behavior. When issues arise, institutions should have a clear procedure for filing grievances.

And, more broadly, there should be open and honest dialogue about the culture of intimidation and hierarchy in science. Universities and labs should seek actionable ways to flatten research team structures so that early-career scientists can feel empowered to speak up against problematic behavior.

Change is hard and takes time. Talking about racism with your colleagues is even harder. Mopping up centuries of racism that have percolated into everyday parlance will take a long time. However, science thrives when there are alternate perspectives. Now more than ever, we must acknowledge that and champion a culture of positive change.

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